

POWER, AUTHORITY AND POINTLESS ACTIVITY
(THE DEVELOPMENTAL DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL THERAPY)

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If excitement about postmodern and discursive therapies has recently waned, as editors Tom Strong and David Pare suggest, perhaps this is because, for the most part, these therapies are all talk! This is, paradoxically, their strength relative to mainstream modernist therapies and their limitation relative to what is needed if we human beings are to transform our emotionality so as to prevent our killing ourselves off (whether quickly or painfully slowly).

We have been asked to speak concretely and practically to readers, to show our therapeutic approach—social therapy—in action, to stay grounded in our practice—and we will. However, we must, as well, situate ourselves as “on the left” of the postmodern spectrum, both methodologically and politically—which, we hope to show, is neither a characteristic nor the “location” of social therapy, but its activity. To do so, we need to speak to the issue of power.¹

¹ In presenting our understanding of power and subsequently of social therapy, we recognize that our position is but one of many on the broad landscape. Our “assertions” are, in the best postmodern sense, not Truth, nor even local truths, but our opinions given expression to in a particular discourse.

I. POWER AND AUTHORITY REVISITED

Among the more thoughtful Marxist critiques of postmodernism is Ian Parker's "Against Postmodernism: Psychology in Cultural Context," which appeared in *Theory & Psychology* (Parker, 1998). Parker's critique of postmodernism is, as we understand it, valid. What is his criticism? Essentially, that most versions of postmodernism avoid or deny the issue or question of *power*. Parker has leveled this attack against postmodernism in general and, we must add in the name of intellectual honesty, at virtually all of our positive writings on postmodernism. Some postmodernists avoid the issue (question, topic, etc.) of power, we imagine, because they take power to be the fundamental flaw of modernism and, therefore, it is precisely what postmodernism must get rid of (as if avoiding something gets rid of it!). Others, with varying degrees of sophistication, deconstruct and discard power as a necessary component of social life. We have always been somewhat bewildered by Parker's critique of our efforts since we regard all that we have written—and far more importantly, what we have organized or created—as a postmodern explication/expression of power. For we believe that the matter of power (not to mention the power of matter) must be postmodernized if we are to go beyond postmodernism as a mere stage of modernism (Jameson, 1984).

Power (or the word "power" if you prefer), no doubt, has multiple meanings. But, as we have long argued, the socio-political sense of power is best understood in its dialectical relationship to *authority*. First, some simpleminded remarks. Authority goes from the top, down. It is imposed. Most importantly, it must be known. Power comes from the bottom, up. It is expressed. It is created. Obviously, in ordinary language, power

and authority are often treated as synonymous. Yet nothing could be further from the truth (in our view, everything is actually equidistant from the truth, viz. an infinite distance!). But the commonplace confusion of the two, power and authority, says a great deal about the *authoritarian* structure of our ontic, now worldwide, culture. For not only are commodities fetishized—turned into god-like authorities, à la Marx—but *everything* is commodified. Hence knowledge, scientific and otherwise, is God-like here in late-modernism/early postmodernism.

The fetishization of knowledge has led some philosophers (for example, Rorty, 1982, 2000; Newman, 1999; Newman and Holzman, 1996) to abandon it, and others (for example, Davidson, 2000) to attempt to rehabilitate it. But even “getting rid” of knowledge is not enough. The more serious issue (activity) is eliminating the *authority of knowledge* in favor of the *creativity of power*—not to mention the power of creativity.

Even Davidson, the supreme rehabilitator, recognizes the defect of knowing as an authoritarian conception. He believes we can overcome that defect analytically, i.e. philosophically, and he is no doubt right (he almost always is!).² But it would make no difference, since philosophy (analytical or otherwise) has for many years now had little or nothing to do with the activities and the struggles of ordinary people. Philosophy has no one to blame for that except contemporary philosophers. Newman and Rorty have not

² Donald Davidson, one of the foremost contemporary American philosophers, engages in a dialogue with Richard Rorty in which Davidson argues that in order to make sense of our interpretations of others in meaningful discourse, we must have a notion of truth. Davidson’s essays, along with others by Jürgen Habermas, Hillary Putnam, Daniel Dennett and others, appears in *Rorty and His Critics* (Brandom, 2000).

University of Calgary

Comment: This would be a place where I’d be up for a conversation – perhaps at the end of the paper around your move of speaking to the multiple meanings of power, then responding with a particular meaning. I see some room to talk about other views of power which we can return to later.

Lois & Fred: Tom, if you want to raise some points about other views of power that you’d like us to respond to, please do so and we will if we have something to say about them.

University of Calgary

Comment: I would be up for a discussion around practically-critically examining the utility of forms of knowing with you, that it seems to subvert ‘its’ authority without abandoning forms of knowing and having to start from scratch, so to speak.

Lois & Fred: we are extremists with regard to knowing. We are calling for its elimination. So to raise the issue of the utility of forms of knowing and to urge us to speak about not abandoning forms of knowing is effectively denying what we’re saying. It’s like raising questions about whether there are forms of an earth-centered universe that we shouldn’t abandon. Given that we reject both paradigms, there’s no reason to discuss it. It might be more fruitful conversationally if you choose to disagree with us and say why, rather than ask us to discuss something that requires us to accept your or change our point of view.

abandoned philosophy. Rather, they are unwilling to abandon people in the name of the ever-shrinking academic niche into which philosophy has retreated. Unless postmodernism wishes to become as irrelevant as institutionalized philosophy, it must (we believe) move beyond a *deconstruction* of knowing (which, in its extreme form, is an *elimination* of knowing, Newman and Holzman, 1997) to an active reconstruction of power—the *activity of power*.

In its historic roots (religious, legal, scientific, civic, etc.) authority is dominantly individualistic. The “author” is, for the most part, an individual, an actor, an agent. There is, strictly speaking, no activity of authority. It is fundamentally *regulatory*. Authority is an inactive negative for essentially inhibiting growth and development in the name of those in control—or, as we sometimes confusedly say, in the name of those “in power.” But being “in power” (somewhat ironically) does not at all involve the activity of power. It is, rather, the commodification of power (labor power) into authority. And while commodities can be sold, they do not develop; they are consumed. Authority stifles growth. It is not a necessary evil. It is an unnecessary evil. What is necessary for development is the activity of power, the exercise of power, the development of power by the many—collectively, democratically and creatively. It is the work of the laborer, Marx teaches us, that creates value (Marx, 1967). It is the authoritarian commodification of this process that yields a *realization* of this value which, in turn, maintains the authority of the owners of the means of production.

But authority (vs. power) goes well beyond the economic sphere. It is constantly present, under capitalism, in the psychological sphere. The human capacity to authoritarily commodify oneself is in constant psychological struggle with the human

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Comment: I'm with you on this being one source of power and wonder if you mean to extend 'authority' to those who threaten or resort to violence to achieve or sustain power over others. Given that many therapist readers work in countering violence and its effects, they would want to see how you position yourselves on this issue.
Lois & Fred: We think you misunderstand us here, as we mean to distinguish power from authority rather than seeing authority as one source of power, as you state. We would want to treat those who threaten or resort to violence by helping them to see that authority is abusive and antithetical to power.

desire and capacity to exercise power *without commodification*, i.e., freely. This understanding, first articulated by one of us in a vulgarly ultra-left political form in *Power and Authority* (Newman, 1974), has been refined in practice, over decades, into what is now identified as *social therapy*.

Our efforts to give meaning to the concept of power led us to practicing and speaking of the *activity* of power rather than either a *definition* of power (a classical modernist mistake) or the *use* of power (a revisionist understanding of Wittgenstein). On our view, a careful and sympathetic reading of Wittgenstein (such as that of Baker, 1992) suggests that it is not meaning and use which are equatable, but meaning and the *activity of using*. Meaning is a *doing*, not an interpretation. (“the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life,” Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 11). The use of something, on the other hand, is a functional interpretation (an Aristotelian essence)—What is a chair used for? To sit on? The activity of using is, in point of fact, what the chair *is* used for (standing on it to swat a mosquito). The meaning of a term is not its interpretive use but what it is (*in activity*) used for. Wittgenstein’s “slab” examples (Wittgenstein, 1953) make this point precisely because the function of the “slab” is unknown (indeed, unknowable). The endless “ordinary language” analyses, based presumably on Wittgenstein’s later writings, bear little or no resemblance to the pointlessness of Wittgenstein’s “slab” examples—indeed, to the pointlessness of all of Wittgenstein’s later thinking. Thus, it is the activity of power, not the pointedness of power, that interests us in social therapy and, indeed, throughout our organized postmodernist community.

University of Calgary

Comment: This kind of language can bring things back to an individual’s intentions, when I think you mean something more dialogic – like Bakhtin’s notion that the word in any dialogue is half ‘mine’. Said differently, the “used for” piece can be seen as what an individual uses a word for, or how the group makes use of the word – I’m guessing you mean the latter but that does not come through for me.
Lois & Fred: The point we are trying to make here has nothing to do with individual/group. Rather, we’re making the distinction between the use of the word as characterized by the dictionary and the use of the word as people actually use it in everyday life discourse. To use the tool analogy, there is a distinction between the use of a screwdriver in the words of the hardware store owner and the use of the screwdriver by people in their homes or workplaces.

Postmodernism must be an organized activity—it must be performed—if it is to be truly powerful. The temptation to keep postmodernism unorganized, or even disorganized, is a misunderstood libertarianism, an anti-power perspective—ultimately, a liberal authoritarian perspective. Postmodernism must reorganize the world in anti-authoritarian ways, i.e. in powerful ways. But powerful ways must be activities. As with Aristotle’s practical syllogism, “the conclusion” of postmodernist understanding must be an action (more precisely, an activity). For postmodernist understanding is a moral discourse. It goes from descriptive premises to a normative activist conclusion (in Aristotle’s language, an action). It is not a mode of thought going from description (interpretation) to description (interpretation). It is a journey from “what is” to “what ought to be.” As such, it is creative and powerful.

University of Calgary

Comment: Here I thought you might have wanted to also speak to Parker’s criticism of postmodernism as a “quintessentially academic position” – building on your ‘more than talk’ comment. It is implied in your first two sentences here, but could, for my tastes, benefit from a bit more clout.

While Aristotle’s practical syllogism (which was, for him, the form of the ethical statement)³ is an interesting refiguration of our activist manifesto, Aristotle was, of course, the grandfather of dualism (in postulating the particular-universal dualistic distinction). . And modernism is, arguably, little more than dualism writ large. From Lovejoy to Dewey to Quine to Davidson to Rorty, and on and on and on, dualism has been under attack for a century. Still, it flourishes, largely because, as we noted earlier, philosophy (including critical philosophy) is so alienated from the popular culture. Postmodernism’s efforts to present a critique of deadly dualism in a more popular voice has brought nasty self-serving criticism from the establishment intellectual community—including, of course, the philosophers. In their efforts to defend themselves from these vicious pseudo-intellectual attacks, postmodernists have for the most part noticeably avoided the theoretical psychological writings of Lev Vygotsky, no doubt because he was

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Comment: I flag this because I know you raise morality as an issue later – I read ‘oughts’ as moral claims

University of Calgary

Comment: While I know what you mean here the average reader might not, so even a parenthesized example here would help. I know you get to this later.
Lois & Fred: see change in text

a Marxist—and a Soviet Marxist at that. But, on our view, Vygotsky’s critique of psychological dualism is potentially of great value in understanding the activity of power and the creation of a new psychology.

First, Vygotsky gave us a new conception of method, one that is not dualistically instrumental—tool for result—but monistically dialectical—*method as simultaneously tool-and-result* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).⁴ With this, the scientific community could have finally ended the theory-practice debate, yet still it persists, even among postmodernists. Second, his *zone of proximal development* offered psychology a way out of the conundrums generated by its dualistic framework: person-environment, self-other, internal-external, to name the most longstanding (Vygotsky, 1978). As we understand Vygotsky, learning and development in early childhood is a tool-and-result activity in which learning leads—dialectically, not linearly—development, a phenomenon made possible by the social, collective construction of the environment that makes learning-and-development possible (Newman and Holzman, 1993). Creating such zones of proximal development is the activity of power.

Third, Vygotsky deconstructed the centuries-old dualism between thought and word and, in so doing, he provided a means for the rejection of not only the pictorial but also the pragmatic view of language. His position can be seen in the following remarks:

University of Calgary
Comment: I’m proposing this word to make it clearer the link between your previous two sentences. If it doesn’t fit, please consider making the link between the previous two sentences (raising ZPD as a construct, then speaking to it as an activity) more explicit.

⁴ The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).

The relationship of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a movement from thought to word and from word to thought ... Thought is not expressed but completed in the word. We can, therefore, speak of the establishment (i.e., the unity of being and nonbeing) of thought in the word. Any thought strives to unify, to establish a relationship between one thing and another. Any thought has movement. It unfolds. (1987, p. 250)

The structure of speech is not simply the mirror image of the structure of thought. It cannot, therefore, be placed on thought like clothes off a rack. Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word. Therefore, precisely because of the contrasting directions of movement, the development of the internal and external aspects of speech forms a true unity. (1987, p. 251)

There are not two separate worlds, the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking. There is, instead, the dialectical unity, speaking/thinking. Children would not be able to perform as speakers, and thereby learn to speak, if thinking/speaking were not a *completive social activity*. Like Wittgenstein, Vygotsky provided the basis for a non-dualistic (non-expressionist, non-descriptive) conception of language and a method for moving beyond epistemology (even a social one) to a new ontology of activity.

University of Calgary
Comment: I love this piece

Social therapeutic practice is in many ways a synthesis of Wittgenstein's and Vygotsky's approach to language and human subjectivity (Newman and Holzman, 1996, 1997). "Completion" is far more than a critique of dualism. It is a positive (postmodern) move (an activist move) beyond dualism. It is not, like dualism, secretly value laden. It is not pointed. It is (like Wittgenstein) properly pointless. As such, it is a useful frame of reference for a value-free psychology—indeed, for an infinitude of value-free psychologies. Creating these psychologies—actively creating new psychologies—is, in our view, the critical work (the revolutionary activity) of postmodernism.

University of Calgary

Comment: do you want any link up of zpd's and language games?

University of Calgary

Comment: I would see this as value-free in the sense that there is no a priori value given to the group, but that in its own way is a value-stance, perhaps in a meta-way: let the people involved work out the values around which they will be active. So, my question here would be: are the activities of those within a zpd not partly value-based, even as they are sorted out? Won't the group arrive at some bases for its activities – however much these bases shift – that are a reflection of emergent and ephemeral group values?

Lois & Fred: As we understand it, values within a modernist framework are, by definition, immune from constant transformation; they are alienated from the creative process and commodified as "values." If people in social units are continuously engaging underlying values, so that there is no "value"—as they are in social therapy—then they're not values in the modernist sense. That's what we mean by value-free.

II. SOCIAL THERAPY—POINTLESS, POWERFUL AND PARADOXICAL

If you have been following our argument, you may have spotted some seeming paradoxes. Two are of particular relevance to the doing of social therapy. One, if individuals have become commodified selves, how can they exercise their power freely, i.e., uncommodified? Two, we seem to be saying that morality and moral discourse can and ought to be pointless and value free, but aren't these the very things that comprise morality and moral discourse? We will take each of these in turn.

Typically, people come into therapy groups, as they come into any group setting, individuated. They want help and think that the way to get it is individualistically—a perfectly understandable notion, given that in our culture people are socialized to an individuated learning and development model. They say things like, "I had this awful fight with my mother last night. I was furious....and I'm really upset right now." They look to the therapist for some advice, solution, interpretation, explanation or, in more

postmodern approaches, leadership in a collaborative process that might generate some new understanding of themselves. They are, again understandably, appealing to *authority*—that of the therapist, of knowledge and of language. To the extent that *power* is a relevant concern to them, they want only to “feel more powerful,” by which they typically mean that they want, *as individuals*, to have “more control” over their lives.

People come to social therapy with similar understandings and expectations, even if they might have heard that it isn't like “ordinary” therapy. Social therapy is not designed to help individuals with their individual problems, nor to help individuals feel or become more powerful, since we believe that only *authority*—and not *power*—is ascribable to individuals. It is, rather, designed to help people *exercise* their collective power to create new emotional growth, a process that requires deconstructing the sense of self (an authoritarian commodification) and reconstructing the concept of social relationship.

Our experience is that this comes, not from some abstract ideological commitment, but from a participatory process in which people actually construct something together—namely, the group. The key focus in social therapy is building the group. Groups are typically composed of 10-25 people, a mix of women and men of varying ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, professions and “problems.” Most groups are ongoing (although we do some time-limited groups) and meet weekly for 90 minutes. Members' length of time in group varies; some people remain for years, others for shorter periods of time, and new members join periodically.

University of Calgary

Comment: This wouldn't fit for my take on some of these therapies. Yes, there would be collaboration but, for the most part the deference would be in the direction of the client for any understanding or action befitting him/her. Of course, therapists can delude themselves in this regard but to look at Tom Andersen, Harlene Anderson's, or Arlene Katz's work I don't see their approaches as fitting your description. I agree with your next sentence, but I am genuinely curious: can therapists not create with clients a version of the ZPD that is dialogic and non-knowledge-based, in your view? Is some version of what you have been saying not the message you hope practicing therapists might take from your work and writing, and adapt to their own practice?

Lois & Fred: Yes. We do hope people will take our work and adapt it to their own. Recognizing that people will take whatever they take and do whatever they do, however, we hope that they will take from our work the need to engage the basic presuppositions of their own work. If not we will have failed in our efforts (which won't deter us from continuing to polemicize against sneaking truth or knowing back in to therapy).

Power is the creative capacity of the group—by the exercise of its emotional labor—to generate new environments; authority is the societally overdetermined⁵ predisposition of the individuated members of the group to passively accept class-dominated, patriarchal emotive environments. Conflict between the two gets played out in social therapy groups, where the unit of transformation/change/growth/learning is the group, and the therapist is simultaneously the organizer of the group’s emotive labor power and the potential (or even actual) repository of the group members’ “authoritarian instincts.” The ongoing process of social therapy is the working out of this relationship; as the group engages in the activity of building the group, it is changing its relationship to power and to authority and becoming more powerful. As one social therapy group member, a man in his early 40s, put it: “The social therapy term ‘building the group’ is probably the one that drives people crazy more than any other. It’s so hard to get your head around! There’s a vagueness and a clarity about it at the same time. It’s what’s going on in group. Early on, you can’t see it even though you know something’s happening.”⁶

University of Calgary
Comment: I hope you build on this

In this process people come to appreciate what—and that—they can create. Simultaneously, they come to realize the limitations of trying to learn, grow and create individually and that growth comes from participating in the process of building the groups in which one functions. This new learning rekindles development—development by virtue of the group growing. In social therapeutic terms, human development is the

⁵ For us, “overdetermined” refers to the use of a conception in ordinary discourse without seriously considering the assumptions of that conception.

⁶ This and subsequent quotations from social therapy clients are taken from an ongoing interview project.

activity of creating the conditions for development (Vygotsky's zone of proximal development) and the unit that engages in this activity is the group (the collective).

A recent social therapy group began with a woman, very upset, asking for help. She described what was going on at her job as a teacher in an inner city school, things she and the group members found oppressive and oppressing. Some members of the group responded that they would like to help but that how she was asking was all about herself and her problem and wasn't connected to them or to the work the group had been doing for weeks. The woman acknowledged various group members' comments, but persisted in being upset and saying she needed help with this problem. At one point, she turned to the therapist and asked him for help. He suggested that she respond to the group. She kept pursuing her agenda and group members were becoming exasperated. One long-time member of the group burst into an impassioned and very moving "speech" about how she too comes to group wanting to be taken care of, given advice, etc. for what's going on with her, but she never gets it. Instead, she said, the therapist insists that help comes from building the group, the struggle over that ensues, people do some building, and she leaves group every week feeling very loved and helped from the work.

Then a woman new to the group said that she knew she couldn't get help with her personal problems in social therapy, but that this was OK with her. One or two group members—including the upset woman who had begun the group and had been its focus for much of the time—supported her, others disagreed, and the group went around on this topic for awhile. The therapist then said that as he understood it, those who believed that social therapy doesn't deal with people's personal problems had a misunderstanding. Indeed, it does—*building the group* is how social therapy helps people with their

personal problems. He contrasted how people go to therapy with how they go to a medical doctor. You might go to a medical doctor for a pain in your eye, he said, but if after some conversation and examination, he tells you he has to treat your kidney, you might be surprised but you probably won't fight with him and insist that he must help you in "your way." The social conventions of medicine and illness and health are such that we accept the doctor's way of helping us. But therapy, evidently, is a different story. People come to therapy not only with their personal problems, but also committed to a particular way of getting help with them. The group then worked with another group member who wanted help with problems he was having dealing with his young son; they experimented and played with ways of talking (asking for help) so as to contribute to the growth of the group.

This particular social therapy group session highlights—in both form and substance—the group's active struggle with its power (of collective creativity) and authority (of individual knowing). It also suggests the activist and collective way that the social therapist responds to therapy talk. She or he conveys, in varying ways, that what is being said ("I had a fight; I'm upset; I need help") is of no interest (qua social therapy) except in so far as the group can make use of it in the activity of creating itself into a new socialized helping environment, i.e., in its exercise of power. The task of the group is to *do* something with what people say in therapy, something that contributes to the social process of development. The social therapist works with the group (not the individuated selves that, reductionistically speaking, comprise the group) to organize itself to engage in this process of building the group. In this process the group becomes an *emotional zone of proximal development (emotional zpd)*. The various members, each

University of Calgary

Comment: This ties nicely into group as a creator of methods/results – extending past the particular method brought to therapy. I raise this point because there has been a fairly strong push from one group that embraces postmodern ideas and collaboration, where they see therapy as joining in the client's method but improvising something from it (Barry Duncan and Scott Miller). So, maybe you want to say more here about group as a place to practically-critically test methods and develop others.

at different levels of emotional development, are encouraged to create a new unit with a new level of emotional development, i.e., the group's level of emotional development.

This process involves a qualitative change of therapeutic focus—from the individuated self who discovers deeper insights into his or her consciousness to the collective engaged in the continuous activity of creating a new social unit, the emotional zpd. The overriding question transforms from “How is each individual doing?” to “How well is the group performing its activity?” A longtime social therapy group member speaks to how this impacts: “The focus in social therapy on the group and not the individual is really helpful. It helps you get out of yourself. It changes your orientation to the world, how things are organized in the world.”

Social therapy's ultra-focus on activity, specifically on the activity of speaking, i.e., on the conversation, transforms meaning itself. Reconsidering Wittgenstein from a Marxian and Vygotskian activity-theoretic vantage point, social therapy rejects the equation of meaning and use that is common among many followers and students of Wittgenstein in favor of the dialectical relationship between meaning and activity. Meaning is created, Vygotsky has shown, through the activity of speaking completing thinking. Social therapy extends (“completes”) Vygotsky's picture in the following manner. If thinking-speaking is a continuous process of completing, then the “completer” need not be the same person who is doing the thinking. *Others can complete for us.* When people speak, participate in a dialogue, discussion or conversation (or write), we are not simply *saying* what's going on but are *creating* what's going on. And we understand each other by virtue of engaging in this shared creative activity. As one newcomer to social

University of Calgary

Comment: This brings up, for me, the question: do more emotionally developed people contribute and therefore gain more from the group, a rich getting richer thing, or are there ways in which the social therapist tries to engage group members in sharing their wealth so to speak, so that this doesn't happen? Lois & Fred: Tom, the group is engaged in producing something collectively. Individual members contribute to different degrees and in different ways, but to talk of sharing the wealth in the way that you do makes no sense to us relative to a social therapy group—nor to lots of other groupings. We have a different concept of sharing. For example, baseball players don't share hits but they do share the collective activity of winning the game. In social therapy, there are group members who don't speak a lot and we believe, by what we see and by what they say, that they get a great deal from being in group. People “win” as the group wins, not by virtue of individual “hits.” Vygotsky was among the clearest on this.

University of Calgary

Comment: I hope you speak more to this individual/group dualism. I'm thinking that you offer a very different orientation to being an individual, that building the group yanks folks out of their alienation and that it doesn't abolish the individual but instead makes the social bases on how s/he lives and thrives more evident and do-able. Maybe you want to say more on this, beyond the dualism of individual/social. Lois & Fred: Perhaps we have a basic misunderstanding here. Having two things doesn't imply a dualism. It's the denial, the negation of one by the other, the reduction of one to the other, that's the problem. Many people have reduced the group to the individual (mainstream psychology) or the individual to the group (mainstream marxism)). We do not. In recognizing the groupness of human life, we do not negate individuals.

therapy commented, “Social therapy is like a new practice of relationship. In our group the creating of our conversation is the activity of our interconnectedness.”

Inevitably, and nearly continuously, the group confronts the conflict between our socio-culturally constructed adherence to authority and our world-historic capacity to exercise power, as we saw in the group session discussed above. “*How can we talk so that our talking helps build the group?*” This question encapsulates the group’s process of discovering a method of relating to talk relationally rather than individualistically—in Wittgenstein’s terms, as “activity, or a form of life;” in Vygotsky’s terms, “completely” not expressively. It is the activity of talk—not the substance of talk (its aboutness) nor the use of talk (its societal pragmatic function)—that is the focus of the group’s activity. The authority of language (as expressive of truth, reality and self) is challenged explicitly as people falteringly attempt to converse in this new way, to create meaning together.

Commenting on her group, one woman said, “The group creates a different language in the course of a group [session]. I never realized that the meaning of words is so contextualized. We create a vocabulary and a language that’s particular to each group.”
[In this process, group members come to see that what they are saying to each other has no meaning other than what they create. Like poets, they become meaning makers, creators of language and of a new conception of language, one that is non-essentialist and non-descriptive. It is in the creating of their poem, the therapeutic conversation, that the group exercises its power.

A woman began a recent group saying that she still hated her father. She couldn't be absolutely sure, but she thought he was always out to abuse her, he looked at her in a certain way, etc. The initial response of several group members—a line of questioning

University of Calgary
Comment: Here, Lois, is where my PMTH points on meanings within other groups to which a member belongs comes up. I can see this temporally as the meanings ‘we’ develop are those serving us now, and they are transient, but there are times when meanings developed in one context, such as a social therapy group, can have a bearing on the meanings a member lives with/by in other groups. For example, therapists, also practice generally within regulated bodies where certain meanings have ethical relevance to their continued practice, or ‘clients’ might develop a meaning that wouldn’t fit their marriage. In that regard, I wouldn’t fully buy your sentence here fully, but I’d welcome your response. Perhaps this is a good example of where me as conversational partner can come in, if you feel this might be productive thread to explore. If you want, I can copy and paste a variation on this question to wherever it might fit for us to have that conversation.
Lois & Fred: To reify any particular meaning created in a social therapy group and impose it on another grouping/group context would be antithetical to social therapy. We are teaching a method, a practice and it’s the using of this method in other places that hopefully gets carried over, not commodified meanings.

that is typical in this kind of situation—was to ask for details (what happened, when, for how long, etc.) in order to find out what “really” happened, was she “really” abused, etc.—that is, in order to get to the “truth.” After about twenty minutes, the group began to question what this woman meant by some of the words she was saying and how it was that she was saying them (“What do you mean when you say ‘you hate him’; what do you mean by ‘abuse’; why are you saying this to us now,” etc.), and these words and their contextualization (the group’s *doing* of meaning) became the focus of the conversation.

At this point, the group had abandoned the pursuit of truth in favor of exploring the activity of their speaking together. This changed activity—from trying to find the truth to creating meanings—created a group sense of new meaning rather than a collective sense of truth. Engaging in this activity, the group gains a heightened understanding that finding truth is not possible, that meanings are created collectively and that they have the power to create meanings. In the words of one group member, “The challenge in our group is always to not take what’s said as truth. We don’t always succeed! It’s very freeing, though, when I can hear and see what so-and-so is saying and doing and not experience it as ‘This is really what they’re doing and so this is what I have to do in response.’ People say words and we don’t know what they mean until we create their meaning. The group grows a lot by taking ownership of what it creates.”

All we have said thus far relates to the question of the place of morality in postmodernism in general and postmodern therapies in particular. Morality as we know it is authoritarian—it comes from the top, it is imposed and it must be known. Certain behaviors, acts, values and beliefs are wrenched out of the ongoing life process and reified into a code or system of conduct. People (or peoples) are then judged by how well

they conform to the code or system. Moral discourse is always in reference to authority (the knower or the known, a god, truth, dogma, belief, system or rule, etc.). In trying to escape authoritarianism, much of postmodernism accepts or embraces alternative moralities (i.e., codes or systems of conduct). For this, it is accused by some of being “rampantly relativist” and/or amoral (Parker, 1998; Rosenau, 1992). And we agree that it is, so long as it fails to reject the ontological premise of modernist morality. Why it hasn’t is unclear to us, for there surely is no evidence that human beings require a moral system in order to know what to do. Throughout history, countless terrible things have been done in the name of moral systems (and people seem no better able to know what to do for having such a system). Human beings no more need a code of ethics in order to live morally than children need rules of grammar in order to speak. Neither activity requires an *appeal* to any authority. It is human activity that produces both.

With activity as the ontological unit of human life, social therapy rejects morality (an authoritarian code or system) in favor of *moral activity*. Ordinary people create morality in ordinary ways every day. When it is not commodified into a finished product or code (and then imposed on its creators by others, usually those “in power”), but is allowed to be continuously created and developed by its creators, then moral activity is another tool-and-result of the social process of making meaning. It is then not authoritarian but powerful.

Sharing his experience in social therapy, a man in his early 30s brought up the topic of morality: “There’s a certain morality to social therapy. It’s not so judgmental, not into ‘people should be a certain way.’ It opens up space for people to be *all* the ways they are. The question is what people do together, not how they are. I’m much closer to

University of Calgary

Comment: I’m with you but want to ask you about the ‘authority’ of the group, its ways of authoring and editing the emergent and fluid moral positions within the group. I phrase my question/point this way because of people’s fears of mob mentality and group think on one end, and

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Comment: I’m with you but want to ask you about the ‘authority’ of the group, its ways of authoring and editing the emergent and fluid moral positions within the group. What keeps that authority operating in ways acceptable to its members, without it digressing into forms of groupthink?

Lois & Fred: It seems to us that the best example of group think is modernism itself! The alternative to group think is continuous creativity, the continuous exercise of growth, of creativity, of power. Then nothing turns it into authority. The point of social therapy is not to produce group think but to produce a continuously creative environment in which what happens one week in a therapy group doesn’t become reified thinking and determine what happens the next week. Social therapy is radically nonauthoritarian in its dependency on the continuous process of conversation as the exercise of the group’s power. There are no answers to be applied in other contexts, just a method to be practiced.

people now. It used to be that my relationships were based on what people said five minutes ago or five months ago. But that keeps you distant. In group, we're freed up to have certain kinds of dialogues not based on your interpretation of what people say or on how you're feeling or how they're feeling. It challenges us to be open to bringing something into the mix so we can constantly create something."

In so far as it is realizable, human freedom lies in our collective ability to create meaning, not in our individualistic capacity to discern truth. In social therapy we "make the problems vanish" (following Wittgenstein, 1980) by changing their meaning through an appeal to the collective capacity, responsibility and creative power of the group.

And why isn't all of this just a vulgar idealism? Because, in practice, the philosophically religious dualism, Realist-Idealist, is rejected in favor of an activity-theoretic *world* (more accurately, *life*) view. Social therapy is a humanistic radical rejection of all forms of reductionism. This leaves us with only one tool to build with: human activity. And that tool is a tool-and-result. The anthropological discovery of humans as tool users was the theoretical basis of humanistic Marxism. The psychological discovery of moral humans as tool-and-result users is the theoretical basis of humanistic postmodern Marxism. All creative power to the activity of the people!

Tom here: I could read social therapy as a badly needed response to the excesses of individualism that have been with us since the enlightenment, especially from Locke and Descartes whose views Western society has enshrined. In that sense you invite participants in social therapy to join a very different language game from normal ones where individual views, especially those referenced to objective truths, are 'played'. You locate development in group activity, not in intellectual and other accomplishments

engineered by individuals. But, in so doing it seems to me you create another dualism, that of individual/social. Where that gets challenging for me in reading your work, is in seeing how groups do their group building. Things get ouija board-like for me if you say that individuals aren't contributing to this building process. Where I think I can understand you is that it takes two people giving up a significant piece of their individuality to dance in-sync with each other, a good marriage requires thinking as one in some places and not in others would be another example. Do you want to say more about this individual/social dualism?

Lois & Fred: Back to dualism again. We are not denying that there are multiple things in the world, including individuals and groups. What we are rejecting is reducing one to the other. And what we're interested in is the dialectic relationship between them. Speaking of the "excesses of individualism," one of the most pernicious elements of individualism in our culture is that individual implies ownership, which makes it impossible to engage/experience/create sociality. The subject of our work is activity and in activity theoretic terms the interesting question is the nature of the relationship between individuals and groups and how to shape that relationship in such a way to maximize people's learning and development.

2. I pulled out my Ian Parker writings after reading your comments, including those you had with him on the points you raise early in your chapter. In reading you here, you tackle power after describing it as having multiple meanings. Here you have offered one version of power: authority:power as the focus of your chapter. I like that in one sense but see other forms of power others would say you are not speaking to, such as the power

that arises in violent circumstances, or the power differentials that economically divide people. Parker, as I read him, would claim that constructionists, by focusing on interpretive and constructive activities involved in being human, subvert the claims of those experiencing such power-based experiences – they relativise them away. How does social therapy deal with such things as people living in violent or impoverished circumstances? Are there other meanings for power beyond the authority-power meaning you described here that you see as relevant to people’s lives and social therapy?

Lois & Fred: Although understandable, your question seems to us to be a non sequitur unless you believe that the violent and impoverished circumstances that people live with can be done away with therapeutically. Maybe you do. We don’t. Such things will be done away with by social-economic-political transformation that does away with the need on the part of some for the continuance of such condition. What you’re raising is a political issue. Social therapy doesn’t deal with these kinds of issues. It is people that can transform the world. What we think therapy can do is help people—the changers—change.

3- I grapple with what you have advocated elsewhere as an ‘end to knowing’. When I read that I can think of claims to objectivity, which Humberto Maturana once described as “absolute demands for obedience”. I think this is what you refer to as truth-referential discourse, something you discourage in the practice of social therapy. But, beyond a way of looking at knowing as “objective” it strikes me there are some humbler forms of knowing that we make use of all the time, traditions or forms of knowing that we can selectively use or disregard, and they have some potential value to how people go forward in their lives. Can you say more about your stance on knowing in this regard.

Lois & Fred: Again, when it comes to knowing, we're extremists. Others (you, here, we think) ask for a slight variation on our claims and method so as to include a bit of or a form of knowing or truth. We won't do it, but we can live with this difference of approach and opinion. We think doing that is revisionist, while others think it's accurate and that we go too far. So, we don't think there are any humbler forms of knowing. All knowing is authoritarian. It's just that some forms of knowing are articulated by humble people! We fully support rorty on this matter. In responding to his critics, he successfully articulated ways of understanding various claims without ever relying on a concept of knowing (brandom, 200). For example, in his debate with davidson when davidson rehabilitates truth for logical purposes in relation to understanding language, rorty responds by showing that one need not rehabilitate truth, that no appeal to truth is needed. We think that abstract conceptions like truth are talked "about" more than they are actually employed in everyday life. They're used in descriptions, but not much in doings. Children don't employ them until they get to a certain age when description becomes very important. And then what happens, unfortunately, is we learn to reduce our doings to our descriptions of what we do (another dualism). Social therapy tries to help people break out of this dualism.

Tom: So, "knowing" won't work for you, and I'm sympathetic to that should this word conjure up synonyms like certainty or capital "T" TRUTH. But, people rely on community forms of understanding (stopping when traffic signals are red) or the forms of wisdom (e.g. that there might be things one can learn about parenting from others) from which they can resourcefully draw and coordinate their shared existence together. When one abandons notions of apodictic TRUTH, can there still be room for the kinds of

'truths' some refer to as useful fictions, fictions that may need to be revisited and revised as time and circumstance change? Or, do you mean that people should literally approach life unaware in every respect?

Lois & Fred: No, we do not mean that people should approach life unaware. But what you are calling community forms of understanding and wisdom are among the social cognitive processes that don't require knowing. Human beings understand without knowing and without truth, and surely the human learning process must be possible without awareness. Of necessity, children learn before they come to know. Then, at a certain point in the life process, "knowing" gets added on—for authoritarian reasons. In our work, we resist turning such understanding into authoritarian forms like "kinds of truths," "knowing," "wisdom," etc.

Tom: A final and related question comes out of what could be problematized as the focus for therapeutic work and how that problematizing might occur in the group's activities. I raise this point because I'm trying to better understand the kinds of collaboration involved, how the therapy keeps from being coercive for any member as other group members interact with him/her. Is there a role social therapists play in keeping things from achieving a kind of "tyranny of the group"?

Lois & Fred: This question makes us aware that we have left out an important element of our work that may help to clarify some of what we've been saying—and so we're thankful to you for raising it. Unlike many (most?) therapy groups, social therapy groups are located within a community—a community of groups—(of all kinds—work groups, learning groups, performing groups, to name a few)— and it is this community that works against "the tyranny of the group" you refer to. It's the broader environment in

which social therapy is located that structurally mitigates against the parochialism that can be generated by group therapy. Concretely, within some organizations or private practices, therapy groups are quite isolated from the rest of the world, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. Some groups have rules disallowing speaking about what goes on in the group with non-group members or socializing with group members. Social therapy has no such rules. Even without rules, often it's the case that group members don't have adequate or supportive contexts in which they can talk about their group experience. People in social therapy groups do have these supportive contexts. In our community, talking about what goes on in therapy is standard practice—a regular and lively topic of conversation for many. So, it's the community that plays the role of keeping things from achieving a kind of tyranny of the group. That's where the power resides—not in the therapist. The therapist can't play this role because s/he is bound by confidentiality. But the clients are not.

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