

**How Much of a Loss is the Loss of Self?
Understanding Vygotsky from a Social Therapeutic Perspective and Vice Versa¹**

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*Should I be talking about myself I who
Who am I talking about when
I talk about myself I Who is that
Heiner Müller, “Landscape with Argonauts”*

*Mr. Descartes
Who do you think you are?
What you think
Is what you be
Cogito ergo sum
Sounds okay
But said to whom?
Fred Newman, “Off-Broadway Melodies of 1592”*

One of my favorite quotations attributed to Lev Vygotsky is the following: “A revolution solves only those tasks raised by history: this proposition holds true equally for revolution in general and for aspects of social and cultural life” (Vygotsky, quoted in Levitan, 1982, inside front cover). During Vygotsky’s lifetime, history had raised some monumental tasks, which he devoted his life to addressing. One of them was the crisis in psychology. In our lifetime as well, history is raising monumental tasks. One of them is the crisis in psychology. Psychology’s crisis is a crisis in development: have the world’s people stopped developing—emotionally-socially-intellectually-culturally-morally—and, if so, is there anything to do about it? Has psychology stopped discovering anything

that might be useful to human beings in transforming how we live (together)?

My formal training was as a developmental psychologist, but I prefer the term *developmentalist*, as a way to refer to research and practice to reinitiate human development, which I take to be an historically specific sociocultural need. As a developmentalist, I am not particularly interested in individual experience because I don't think it has very much to do with reinitiating human development. What I am interested in, passionately, is group activity because, following Marx in political philosophy, Vygotsky in child psychology and Newman in psychotherapy, it is the group/the collective/the mass that engages in developmental activity. Individuals have experiences; social units create development. Individuals have selves; social units do not. Social therapy—the psychotherapy created by Newman that I have studied and analyzed alongside him for three decades—is a methodology that works with the human capability of growing as social units, and in that process it shows *the contemporary self* to be an impediment to human development and learning. To answer the question posed in the title of this article, we lose nothing in losing the self. We only gain. What we gain is the opportunity to *create collectivity* and in that process come to sense the social-relational-collective quality of creativity and development. By getting rid of the self, we are more able to see the group, which is—developmentally speaking—the important unit of study.

In my remarks today I will be sharing how I and my mentor and intellectual partner Fred Newman arrived at this understanding and Vygotsky's role in its creation. But first, what is social therapy?

Social therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach that began in the 1970s and has grown into a methodology for supporting human beings to help each other grow and

develop in all kinds of settings and life situations.² As a therapy, it shares company with postmodern, social constructionist, collaborative, narrative and other non-diagnostic psychotherapies that are designed to support the expression of what's positive about people, rather than to fix what's wrong with people. More explicitly developmental than these other approaches, social therapy engages people in creating their therapy, because engaging in this activity helps people to transform, to grow, to be more responsive to environments, to give expression to the sociality of human existence and to recreate our humanness.

Social therapy also engages alienation, explicitly. In everyday language, alienation typically refers to a psychological state of estrangement or loneliness. To Marxist influenced psychologists and cultural critics, however, alienation is more than a feeling state; it is a psychological-sociocultural concept that has its origins in Marx's writings about capital and political economy (for example, Marx, 1966). As Marx used the term, alienation refers to how, under capitalism, production is organized in such a way that the products of production are severed from their producers and from the process of their production—people wind up relating to alienated products (commodities). The application of Marx's economic term to psychological concerns (by Lukács, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and some contemporary critical thinkers such as Rose, 1990 and Sève, 1978) is that, under capitalism relations between people are treated as relations between things. It is not merely the production of cars, loaves of bread and computers from which we are alienated; in contemporary Western culture, people relate to their lives, their relationships, their feelings, their culture, and so on, as things, torn

away from the process of their creation and from their creators. This “thingification” is seen to be a major factor in people’s emotional problems.

Newman brought this wealth of theory into practical application in the development of social therapy. Basic to social therapy are two human capacities that engage alienation: *activity* and *performance*. Newman and I use the term activity in Marx's sense—“revolutionary, practical-critical, activity” (Marx, 1974, p. 121)—and not as a general reference to human action and/or agency, as do many social constructionist and socio-cultural psychologists. *Revolutionary, practical-critical activity* is human practice that is fully self-reflexive, dialectical, transformative of the totality and continuously emergent. It is human practice that “abolishes the present state of things” (Marx and Engels, 1974, p. 57) by the continuous transformation of mundane specific life practices into new forms of life. Revolutionary activity is, for social therapists, the relevant ontological unit for psychology and psychotherapy in these times, requiring a non-epistemological (non-objectivist, non-cognitive) methodology (Newman and Holzman, 1997).

Performance, we have come to believe, is the revolutionary activity by which human beings create their lives (develop)—qualitatively transforming and continuously reshaping the unity that is *us-and-our environment*. The human capacity to perform, that is, to be both "who we are" and "who we are becoming/who we are not" at the very same time, is central to social-therapeutic practice. Newman relates to his clients as an ensemble of performers who are, with his help, staging a new therapy play each session. In this way, they can experience themselves as the collective creators of their emotional

growth. Based in the power of performance as revolutionary activity, social therapy can be described as a psychology of *becoming*.

Social therapists relate to therapeutic discourse as performance, or performed conversation. The effectiveness of talk therapy stems primarily from some kind of development that takes place in the process of ensemble, collective performance not just of someone else's play, but in the performance of our own discourse with each other (Newman, 1999). Social therapists and their clients *perform* therapy in order to expose the fictional nature of “the truth” of our everyday language, our everyday psychology and our everyday stories, and not to create a new truth disguised as a better story. The stories we tell ourselves and others about our lives—typically taken as an accounting of events that have occurred—are as much what happened and, thus, as much a part of our history as “what happened.” The telling of stories continues the ongoing process of “what happened.” But to the extent that we mistake our stories for the events they are purportedly about, we can get locked into interpreting our lives in terms of these “truths” about ourselves. In this way, we distance ourselves from ourselves— from our “past,” which we take to be fixed and determining of who we are now, and from our current relational activity—the telling of the story—which we take to be a description of what happened. When this happens, we can fail to experience storytelling itself as something that we are doing now which is continuous with—and part of creating—our history. To be liberated from this kind of truth-based referentiality is to allow for emotional growth, and many other developments as well (see Holzman, 2000, Holzman, 2006a and b, Holzman and Mendez, 2003; Newman, 1999, 2000; Newman and Holzman, 1996, 1997).

Group is the primary modality of social therapy. Social therapy groups are typically comprised of 10-25 people – a mix of women and men of varying ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, professions and “presenting problems.” Most groups are ongoing (although there are time-limited groups) and meet weekly for 90 minutes. Some group members remain for years, others months; people leave and new members join. A group typically begins in a manner common to much group psychotherapy, as different people bring up issues they want help with. The specific social therapeutic task for the group is figuring out how to talk about what they want to talk about —what to do with all the “stuff” that’s been put out, how to create an environment, a conversation, an ensemble production. In other words, the therapeutic work is more methodological than psychological. The therapist helps the group practice method, that is, create a tool (more accurately, a Vygotskian tool-and-result) uniquely and specifically designed to deal with what it is they want to talk about.² It is in the group’s activity of creating the method that particular issues get engaged. The social therapeutic process, then, is not to help people with their problems; rather, it is to help groups of people create environments for getting help. The therapeutic focus is the group, the ensemble, engaged in the continuous activity of creating the environment, the tool, the conversation and a new social unit -- all at the same time (Newman and Holzman, 1997).

Visions of the Self

While it is safe to say that the self has always been a preoccupation of philosophers and psychologists (at least in the West), it is equally important to recognize that the self is an

historical entity. Some agree that the self is “real” and argue over whether it is material (and if so, of what kind of material it consists). Others claim that the self is an illusion and offer reasons for this. Real or illusory, however, there is wide consensus that the self is not only an essential human conception/entity/characteristic but that it was positive for the human species and for the development of civilization. Yet just as the self has been conceptualized differently at different points in history, so too has its impact and utility been profoundly different. Social therapy’s critique is of the contemporary individuated, autonomous self and how it operates in the individual and in society today. There is no denying the profoundly emancipatory impact of the conception of the individuated self that emerged during the Enlightenment and immediate post Enlightenment periods. This conception of the self is arguably among the most emancipatory ideas in human history—essential to the recognition and granting of individual rights and responsibilities. The question is, what has it turned in to? Is it still a positive force? Is the presumption of and belief in the individuated self contributing to the general welfare, to a just and equitable world, to the continuous social, emotional and cultural development of the world’s people? Or has the individuated self—like capitalism, the economic system that produced it and that it helps to perpetuate—turned into its opposite, devolving from a progressive, developmental force (not without its many injustices, of course) into a regressive, stultifying authority?

Newman’s years of practicing therapy and mine of studying and analyzing it convince us that the contemporary self is non-developmental and the cause of much distress. People come into therapy with pain and problems, the pain and problems of being an alien and non-human object to themselves. They speak the commodified

language of emotionality. They present their emotional problems in a way that manifests their commitment to their individuated identity—"I have this problem." Language, concept and ontology have become super-alienated as they both give expression to and fuel our super-alienation. Marx well understood the inhumanity of commodification in the early years of industrial capitalism, and his 19th century language is even more hard-hitting when read in relation to 21st century emotionality:

Private property has made us so stupid and partial that an object is only *ours* when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., in short, *utilized* in some way; although private property itself only conceived these various forms of possession as *means of life*, and the life for which they serve as means is the *life of private property*—labor and creation of capital.

Thus *all* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of *all* these senses; the sense of *having*. (Marx, 1967, p. 132)

The poverty of this "sense of having" is what I believe therapists need to deal with. Despite the fact that people come to therapy because they want relief from their emotional pain, they typically relate to that pain as a prized possession—for some people, as all they "have." This commodified understanding of human emotionality creates an inner world that is untouchable. It creates ways of relating to others that are contractual and competitive. It creates an acquisitive form of life. It creates an impoverished

repertoire of emotional responses to life situations. Therapists must find ways to strip away the commodification that over-determines not only how we see and feel, but also how we speak and relate, and what we believe to be possible.

Kenneth Gergen has written extensively about the developmental possibilities of the postmodernization of contemporary life. In *The Saturated Self* (1991) he traces the history of conceptions of the self, focusing on the transformations from romantic to modern to postmodern. His critique of the dominant Western notion of the isolated, bounded, individuated self is clear, as is his belief that the process of its postmodern breakdown offers great possibilities for human progress. (I agree, if perhaps for different reasons.) Less widely known than the saturated self is Gergen's distinction between identity politics and relational politics, which is, in my view, an equally valuable contribution to psychological-political dialogue on the role of self and identity. In the following brief excerpt, Gergen provides an important illustration of the way individualist ideology-psychology permeates our discourse and overdetermines our political-social life.

In important degree, identity politics is a descendent of Western, individualist ideology. It is not the single individual who commands our interest in this case; rather individual identity is conflated with group identity. Individual and group interests (and rights) are one. In this way, the group replaces the individual as the center of concern, but the discourse of individuality is not thereby interrupted. Rather, the group is treated discursively in much the same way as the individual: imbued with good and evil intent, held

blameworthy, deemed worthy of rights and so on. In spite of the shift toward the social, we thus inherit the problems of individualism yet once again— simply one step removed. Rather than a society of isolated and alienated individuals—a potential war of all against all in the individualist sense—we have a battlefield of antagonistic groups. (Gergen, 2000, p. 139).

Even as the self becomes saturated and postmodernism loosens it from its modernist isolationism, modernist notions of the self dominate in everyday and academic language and thought. What do we usually associate with having a self? *A core, a center, who I am, me* come to mind as what ordinary people would say. Psychologists and philosophers are more likely to describe the self in relation to subjectivity, reflexivity, identity or continuity. To psychoanalysts and psychotherapists the self is often used interchangeably with concepts like ego, personality, inner agent and autonomy. Moreover, in nearly all traditional psychotherapeutic approaches, the self is implicated in diagnosis and treatment; the presumption is that the therapy works— defined variously as a personality change, the relief of symptoms, a new sense of empowerment, the development of positive self-concept, etc.— through a process of discovering or revealing the true self, fixing a shattered or broken self, replacing a false self, or reconstructing or reintegrating a fragmented or incomplete self.

Among the more interesting philosophical discussions of the self are those coming from consciousness studies. Dennett is an excellent example. To Dennett, the self is an illusion, best conceptualized as a narrative center of gravity that helps us keep track of what we are doing, have done and will do in the future. The need to keep track evolved

along side the ability to communicate, for once human beings began to talk to each other, especially about our own and others' actions and plans, we needed some way to monitor our and others' behavior. Each human being, Dennett posits, needed to create within itself a subsystem for interacting with others and with itself (Dennett, 2003). With "chaos brewing in our brains" (p. 46) the self provides us with the illusion that we are unified inside ourselves and in time. It is an illusion that allows "me with a means of interfacing with myself at other times" (p. 49).

In Dennett's story, as well as those of the psychoanalysts and developmental and social psychologists, the self is needed precisely because—and if—each of us is a separate, self-contained individual who inevitably comes in contact with other separate, self-contained individuals. In this view, the world is inhabited by collections of individuals. The self provides each and every individual with the individuated unity made necessary by the existence of other individuals. Within this closed frame of Self/Other (I/Thou), the self and its construction or reconstruction has a certain logic and purpose. However, once you step out of that frame and posit other kinds of human entities and configurations, the self loses both its logic and purpose.

Social therapy is a step outside of that frame. The self's antagonist is no longer the other. Indeed, that confrontation seems to be a developmental dead end. What is of interest is the logic, purpose and role of the group/collective/mass. From a social-therapeutic perspective, it is the *I/We* relationship that needs examining. For *we* is a bona fide human entity; collectivity is not reducible to a collection of individuals. Largely neglected or misunderstood philosophically, psychologically and politically, collectivity

is essential to create and to understand if we are to make any progress in developing a more humane world.

Questioning Inner Life and Individuated Self

Newman and I entered the ongoing philosophical and psychological conversation about the individuated self through questioning why therapy was effective. Newman's training in philosophy of science and language, coupled with his own traditional therapy at a certain point in his life, posed a conundrum: He did not believe in an inner life and yet he found that doing therapy, in which talking about your inner life is what you do, was helpful to him. Not willing to concede to the existence of an inner life, he searched for how this could be, at the same time as he began to practice a therapy that was explicitly, as he put it, "an effort to be of help to people with the usual things they bring to a therapist's office, but to not invoke the conception of an inner self which I was [supposed to] help them get more deeply into" (Newman, 1999, p. 125).

I met Newman as he was beginning this practice in the mid 1970s. I had just completed my PhD in developmental psychology and psycholinguistics at Columbia University with Lois Bloom and was working with Michael Cole at his Rockefeller University laboratory. My work with both Bloom and Cole involved me in creating new, more ecologically valid research approaches to studying language and cognition that were simultaneously critiques of the dominant methods and conceptions in psychology. In particular, it was the understanding of development as a process of an isolated,

encapsulated individual self getting activated by its environment that we found problematic.

In terms of the early acquisition of language, Bloom and I believed that children's utterances in the first few years of life could not be understood in terms of idealized grammatical categories of the adult language, nor in isolation from the context in which they are uttered. Rather, they could be comprehended in terms of patterns of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic categories that were fundamentally expressive of (and, perhaps, inseparable from) children's actions and interactions and people and objects.

Bloom and I (and eventually a whole group of graduate student researchers) were wary of the mentalism and teleology in Piagetian theory, which posited schemas and operations inside the child's mind to explain how human beings come to operate on the world in terms of logical and/or scientific thinking. We thought of our work as descriptive, not explanatory (as if it was simple to separate the two)—more akin to linguistic and anthropological concerns than to philosophical problems about the nature of mind. We saw our goal as describing child talk in concert with non-verbal context, rather than in comparison with adult talk. To the extent that we made knowledge claims, we tried to confine ourselves to what children knew about language and not venture to posit what they knew about “the world” (Hood and Bloom, 1977).

Despite my fascination with this work, I wondered if our elegant analyses had anything to do with the children we were studying. I couldn't reconcile the gap between our categorizations of their talk and their language-learning lives; the complexity of our descriptions of what was going on linguistically and non-linguistically came nowhere near capturing the richness of their—essentially socially creative—activities. I began to

question whether it was possible to learn anything about how children develop through this kind of intellectual exercise. I didn't have an alternative, but still I couldn't accept that we *had to* isolate variables – to separate out from the total interactive activity what the child said, and then relate to what the mother or I said, what we were doing together, or what went on five minutes or five days earlier as *context*. I was uncomfortable with what seemed to me the artificial split that this made between inside and outside, between psychological and social, and between child and environment.

In the Cole lab, the key methodological issue was validity (Cole, Hood and McDermott, 1978). Specifically, the question we posed was, “If psychological theory and findings are generated in the laboratory (or under experimental conditions designed to replicate the laboratory), how can they be generalized to everyday life?” In other words, did they have any “ecological validity” and, if not, could we develop a methodology for a psychology that *was* ecologically valid? We considered the laboratory as a methodology and not merely a physical location. For it seemed to us that naturalistic and observational research conducted in everyday life settings was guided as much by the laboratory's methodological assumptions as any research conducted inside a psych lab. Conversely, much of what happens inside the laboratory during an experiment is what happens everywhere—but in the lab, it is ignored because the experimental paradigm disallows it. We hoped our research would not only expose the pervasive laboratory biases of how children's learning and development were studied and understood, but also help us create a new, ecologically valid set of investigative practices. Ultimately, our goal was to impact positively on the inequality and inadequacy of American schooling.

In one project we observed and interacted with 8-to-10-year-old children in a variety of school and non-school settings in order to see how cognitive acts, for example, remembering, problem solving, reading, reasoning and so on, were alike and different in the different settings. When we talked to “regular people” about the project, we said we wanted to find out some things about “how come kids who are street smart are school dumb.”

We went looking for individual cognitive acts in non-school settings, but we couldn't find any—in informal settings, children solved problems and remembered things together, not in isolation from each other. About this time, Cole, along with three of his colleagues, had just finished putting together a translation of some of Lev Vygotsky's writings (what became *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky, 1978). We found in Vygotsky corroboration for the positions we were formulating. Cognition, we came to believe, is a social and cultural achievement that occurs through a process of people constructing environments to act on the world. It is located not in an individual's head, but in the “person-environment interface.” This is what an ecologically valid psychology of learning and development needed to study (Cole, Hood, and McDermott, 1978). From this perspective, when we looked at children who were having problems in school, we didn't see their cognitive or emotional difficulties. Instead, we saw a complex socially constructed cultural scene involving many people and institutions. We concluded that learning disability, for example, does not exist outside of or separate from the interactive work (joint activity) that people do which, intentionally or not, creates “displays” of disability (Hood, Cole and McDermott, 1980; McDermott and Hood, 1982).

We had begun to create an escape from the trap of the individualist paradigm that dominated developmental and cognitive psychology. “Context” moved from the background to share equal footing with “person.” And yet, was it the case that by studying the concrete and real-life situations children are in, we were studying their actual life process? We claimed to be free of the biases of laboratory methodology because we were studying people in their everyday life situations in such a way that we did not exclude *a priori* those elements that laboratory methodology excluded. And certainly we were able to see new things when we looked at social scenes and displays instead of formal cognitive tasks, and at the person-environment interface instead of at individuals. But while what we saw might have been new, we were still seeing at a distance, as observers with a scientific gaze. For us, the environment was an experimental context after all, one in which we hoped to get a “true” —rather than a generalized— picture of what was “really” happening. But for the children, this was not an experiment—it was a scene in their ongoing life performance. What would psychology have to be, I wondered, to see, show, study and create this performance—and the infinite other performances people engage in?

From the social therapeutic perspective, activity-theory provided the beginnings of an answer. Newman, who had left academia and brought his philosophical training to community and political organizing, looked at theoretical material and engaged in intellectual work from a qualitatively different location and vantage point than the university professor. From the Institute that we founded and the broader activist community we and many others built, we saw things in Vygotsky and post-Vygotskian work that I had not seen before. Newman and I looked at activity theory and saw not

another theory but is a qualitatively different conception of method, one which is—in Vygotsky’s language—“the tool and the result of study” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65). The activity-theoretic ontological unit is neither the isolated individual and her or his behavior nor groups of individuals and their behavior, as it has traditionally been in psychology. It is, rather, human activity—human life as continuous process (not discrete products, stages or moments) and as fundamentally relational. People live, create, learn, love, hate, build and destroy through socially constructing environments that make it possible for us to do these things. In other words, in activity theory environment is not a context or background for what people do, but a social practice inseparable from what people do "in" them. So, not only aren’t we isolated individuals separate from each other; we’re not even separate from our environment! While we surely can be (and are, in Western cultures) *distinguished* from environment and from each other, this does not mean we are *separate from* either environment or each other. Instead of two separate entities, there is but one, the unity “persons-environment.” In this unity, environment “determines” us and yet we can change it completely (changing ourselves in the process, since the “it” includes us, the changers). People are social-cultural creators and changers, first and foremost. Growth, learning, change and transformation don’t happen *to us*; we create them.

Newman and I did not immediately grasp Vygotsky’s relevance to social therapy, however. In fact, we worked and wrote together for about a decade before we added Vygotsky to “our team.” During that time I was involved in helping to create an experimental Vygotskian primary school (the Barbara Taylor School) and exploring cognitive and language learning from a Vygotskian perspective strongly influenced by

our social-therapeutic, dialectic understanding of method (Holzman, 1997). When I began to look at social therapy in Vygotskian terms, Fred and I had a qualitatively new way of talking about our work. Social therapy groups were akin to Vygotsky's zones of proximal development in which the joint activity of creating the "zone" is what creates emotional growth. Relating to people in therapy as revolutionaries (something Fred had been speaking and writing about, for example, Newman, 1991) was, in Vygotsky's words, relating to them as "performing a head taller than they are" (Vygotsky, 19XX).

There was, however, still the seeming paradox of talking about one's non-existent inner life. Newman and I began to re-examine Wittgenstein's writings and realized how strongly he had already influenced Newman's therapeutic work. Like others at the time (for example, Baker, 1992), Newman and I began to see Wittgenstein's philosophy as a form of therapy. Attempting to cure philosophers of their illness, Wittgenstein delineated the ways in which how we think about thinking and other so-called mental processes and/or objects creates intellectual-emotional muddles, confusions, traps and narrow spaces, tormenting and bewildering us. We seek causes, correspondences, rules, parallels, generalities, theories, interpretations, explanations for our thoughts, words and verbal deeds (often, even when we are not trying to or trying not to). But what if, Wittgenstein asks, there are none? Wittgenstein had developed a method to help free philosophers from the muddles they get into because of the way the institution of language (how we use language and understand what it is) locks them into seeing things in a particular way. Importantly, he showed, in nearly endless detail and a myriad of ways, that the expressionist picture of communication—that people have an inner life that gets expressed in language—was defective. To him, language was better understood as the

activity of speaking, as a form of life (“The term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life,” Wittgenstein, 1953, XX).

Likewise, Newman and I saw social therapy as a method to help ordinary people get free from the constraints of language and from “versions of philosophical pathologies that permeate everyday life” (Newman and Holzman, 1996, p. 171), so as to have the opportunity to be makers of meaning and not just users of language, to engage in the activity of speaking.

However, something was still missing. If the expressionist conception of language was inaccurate, then what was it that was going on when people are speaking? If our thoughts, ideas, feelings, beliefs and so on, are not somehow “transported” from our minds to other people through language and other means of communication, what is happening? If language is not a mediator between an inner life and outer reality, then what is it? How is it possible for people to make meaning together?

Vygotsky helped answer this question. Early on in our work together, Newman and I had seized upon a statement Vygotsky made which we took to be a new way of understanding method as something to be practiced, rather than something thought up and then applied to “real life”:

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)

It seemed to Newman and me that social therapy was a culturally-historically specific practice of tool-and-result methodology (Newman and Holzman, 1993). Further, we began to see all of human development as tool-and-result activity, meaning that the activity of creating developmental environments (Vygotsky's zpd) is inseparable from growth. Vygotsky had shown that in the zpd of early childhood, children are supported to do what is beyond them, to perform who they are becoming (even as they are who they are), and that this process of creating the zpd is the joint (ensemble) creation of their becoming language speakers. They learn to speak by playing with language. In social therapy, people are supported by the therapists to do what is beyond them, that is, to perform who they are becoming—to create the group. Therapeutic work is actually development work. Helping people to continuously create new performances of themselves is a way out of the rigidified roles, patterns and identities that cause so much emotional pain (and are called pathologies). In social therapy, people create new ways of speaking and listening to each other; they create meaning by playing with language.

Having found the therapeutic in Vygotsky, Newman and I could complete the picture of meaning making only partially constructed by Wittgenstein. In his extensive discussion of the relationship between thinking and speaking, Vygotsky challenges the connectionist/expressionist view that language expresses thought:

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. (Vygotsky, 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 form a true identity. (Vygotsky, 1987, p.251)

Vygotsky's new way of looking at language and thought as one dialectical process, one activity, puts an end to efforts to try to link the "inner" (thoughts) and the "outer" (language). For as Newman and I understand Vygotsky, there are not two separate worlds, the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking. There is, instead, the complex dialectical unity, speaking/thinking. The child would not be able to perform as a speaker (and thereby learn to speak) if thinking/speaking were not a complete social activity (Newman and Holzman, 1993).

Newman and I drew an important implication from this non-expressionist understanding of language. If speaking is the completing of thinking, if the process is continuously creative, then it follows that when people are speaking, what they are doing is not saying what's going on but *creating* what's going on, and that what is called

“understanding each other” comes about by virtue of engaging in this socially complete activity.

The individuated self, which is necessary for the expressionist view of language—there has to be an active agent inside to carry out the internal work of feeling, thinking, and so on—is no longer needed. On this point, I am reminded of a comment by the philosopher W.V.O. Quine: “What is under consideration is not the ontological state of affairs, but the ontological commitments of a discourse. What there is does not in general depend on one’s use of language, but what one says there is does” (Quine, 1963, p. 103). Continuing a discursive ontological commitment to the self, in my view, is an impediment to relating to language as creative activity and, thereby, to developmental activity.

In advocating the growth of collectivity as a tool-and-result of human development Newman and I are attempting to create a methodology that gives voice to the group while not suppressing the individual. This endeavor is historically specific—in our overpsychologized culture, the individual and its isolated, commodified and alienated self is prioritized and constrains the development of collectivity. In the social therapeutic practice of constructing collectivity, the self is deconstructed, but the individual is not constrained. People remain the unique individuals they are. They gain an activist, world-historic sense of being alive, which they often describe as “being in the world and not in my head.” And by virtue of being in the world, *sans* self, they can exercise their collective power to create new environments and new emotional growth—an activity that is beneficial for both the individual and the collective.

Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the “Language Dynamics and the Phenomenology of Individual Experience,” Symposium of the Distributed Language Group, Agder University College, Grimstad Norway, May 2007.
2. For a developmental history and bibliography of writings on social therapeutic methodology in therapeutic, educational, workplace, and cultural settings, see Holzman and Mendez, 2003.

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