

Performative Psychology, Postmodern Marxism, Social Therapy, Zone of Emotional Development. Draft of four entries in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, edited by Thomas Teo and published by Springer Reference.

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## **PERFORMATIVE PSYCHOLOGY**

### **LOIS HOLZMAN**

#### **Introduction**

Performative psychology is a shift from a natural science based and individualistic approach to understanding human life to a more cultural and relational approach. It is critical of mainstream psychology in two specific ways: as an alternative understanding and practice of relating to human beings (i.e., a practical-critical methodology based in the human capacity to perform); and as a newly evolving method of inquiry/research (i.e., a performative ways of doing social science). Postmodern Marxists Fred Newman and Lois Holzman are the initial and primary developers of the former, and social constructionists Ken Gergen and Mary Gergen are the initial and primary developers of the latter.

#### **Key Words**

Performatory, performative, performance, Vygotsky, zone of proximal development, relationality, Ken Gergen, Mary Gergen, Holzman, Newman, psychotherapy, education, inquiry, social science research

#### **Conceptualization**

Both orientations of performative psychology are based in an understanding of human life as primarily *performatory* or *performative*. While these terms have different origins, senses and reference in different disciplines, today both terms broadly connote that people are performers and the world a series of “stages” upon which we create the millions of scripted and improvised scenes of our lives. Contrary to mainstream psychology’s premise that the essential feature of human beings is our cognitive ability

(often accompanied by a subordination of our affective ability), performative psychology puts performance “center stage.” To performative theorists, researchers and practitioners, people’s ability to perform—to pretend, to play, to improvise, to be who we are and “other” than who we are—is simultaneously cognitive and emotive. It is seen as an essential human characteristic, essential to our emotional-social-cultural-intellectual lives—but dramatically overlooked by mainstream psychology.

Practical-critical methodology: Understanding and relating to people as performers

In articulating their practice/theory as performative psychology, Newman and Holzman offer performance as a new ontology (Lois Holzman, 2000; Newman & Holzman, 1997, 2006/1996). Primarily concerned with therapeutics, development and learning, their performatory practice can be understood as a Vygotskian-influenced psychology of becoming.

In his project to develop a Marxist psychology, Vygotsky rejected linearity and causality, and the separation of theory and practice, and process and product that follows. For Vygotsky, method was not a means to an end, but “simultaneously the tool and result of the study” (Vygotsky, 1978) (p.65). He rejected the separation of learning and development into discrete processes that are causally or linearly connected, seeing, instead, a unity of human social activity in which learning leads development (Newman and Holzman, 1993; Vygotsky, 1987). Learning is both the source and the product of development, just as development is both the source and the product of learning. As activity, learning and development are inseparably intertwined and emergent, best understood together as a dialectical unity.

Vygotsky showed that young children are related to simultaneously who they are and who they are not/who they are becoming and, in this way, they develop. Through their joint activity, young children and their caretakers create environments (what he called zones of proximal developments or zpds, Vygotsky, 1987) in which and by which they learn developmentally. By creating zpds, people do things they do not yet know how to do, and children learn and develop by performing—“as if a head taller than they are”

(Vygotsky, 1978)(p.102). In other words, development is the social activity of creating who you are by performing who you are becoming (Newman & Holzman, 1993). Because becoming culturally and societally adapted through performing too often turns into routinized and rigidified behavior, people do not keep creating new performances of themselves. An effective way to intervene on the rigidity of roles that comes with socialization and enculturation is by creating environments for children and adults to perform consciously and in new ways. Developmental performance involves creating the performance “stage” and performing on that stage. (Holzman, 2006, 2009)

Performance theory and practice recognize the emotional and social growth that occurs when people create together theatrically on stage. Practitioners typically use theatrical performance techniques in non-theatrical settings to support the expression of people’s creativity and sociality in all areas of their lives. Additionally, academic study and research of performance, both on and off stage, is being carried out in psychology, anthropology and sociology, and in the professional disciplines of education, psychotherapy, nursing, medicine and community development.

Psychotherapy and education are two areas of fruitful research and practice. Postmodern therapies, including social constructionist, collaborative and social therapies, relate to therapeutic discourse as performed conversation (McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000; Newman & Holzman, 1999; Strong & Pare, 2004). Social therapists, in particular, relate to therapy sessions as therapy plays, and clients as an ensemble of performers who, with the therapist’s help, are staging a new therapy play each session. In this way, clients can experience themselves as the collective creators of their emotional growth (Holzman & Mendez, 2003). In education, both mainstream educational psychologists and postmodern and cultural-historical researchers have become attentive to creativity as *socially performed* and learning itself as a creative activity. Researchers and practitioners engage teaching and learning as improvisational (Lobman, in press; Sawyer, in press) and develop performatory practices of student-teacher engagement (Holzman, 1997; Lobman & O’Neill, 2011; Martinez, 2011). For some, the goal of schooling becomes supporting students and teachers to continuously experience

themselves as learners and performers of their continuous development (Lois Holzman, 2000).

Method of inquiry/research: Performative ways of doing social science

Performative psychology as an alternative mode of communicating psychological concepts, research and practices originated in the work of Ken and Mary Gergen (K. J. Gergen, 2006; M. M. Gergen, 2000, 2001). The term came into use at symposia presented at the American Psychological Association conventions from 1995-1999 organized by Ken Gergen. Presentations took the form of dramatic monologues, dance, multi-media presentations, plays, and poems, each of which dealt with a significant topic of psychological concern and expanded the representations of knowledge psychologists make use of. Having heard of Newman and Holzman's performatory therapeutic, educational and community-building practices, Gergen invited them to participate in the 1996 symposium, entitled "Performative Psychology Redux," for which Newman wrote a play in which Vygotsky and Wittgenstein were in therapy. For several years thereafter, Newman and Holzman presented a live performance of an original Newman psychology play at APA conventions. At the same time, they began to work with the Gergens on creating a broader and multi-disciplinary venue for performance/scholarly work. In 1997, Newman and Holzman, through their East Side Institute, hosted an international conference, "Unscientific Psychology: Conversations with Other Voices" (Holzman, Morss, & (Eds.), 2000). The conference mixed traditional scholarly keynote presentations with performatory responses by the audience. In 2001, the two groups joined forces to sponsor another international gathering, "Performing the World: Communication, Improvisation and Societal Practice," whose aim was to explore the potential of performance for social change. It was a successful venture and Newman, Holzman and the East Side Institute have continued to grow it as a bi-annual event, while the Gergens have continued their mission to advance the performative in social scientific inquiry.

Performative social science is defined by Gergen and Gergen (K. J. Gergen & Gergen, 2011, 2012) as "the deployment of different forms of artistic performance in the execution of a scientific project. Such forms may include art, theater, poetry, music, dance, photography, fiction writing, and multi-media applications. Performance-oriented

research may be presented in textual form, but also before live audiences, or in various media forms (film, photographs, websites)” (Gergen and Gergen, 2011). Central to this endeavor is the need to develop awareness among social scientists that making statements about psychological acts doesn’t represent reality but rather is an expressive act. This draws upon the philosopher John Searle’s now classic work, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, in which he highlighted the performative nature of language, i.e, that utterances perform various social functions over and above conveying content (Searle, 1969, 1979).

Readers wishing to become versed in the history, multi-disciplinarity and methods of this approach are urged to read the complete article, “Performative Social Science and Psychology,” that appeared in *FQS Forum*, January, 2011.

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## POSTMODERN MARXISM LOIS HOLZMAN

### Introduction

If you pair “postmodern” and “Marxism” (in, say, a Google, Google scholar, library or Amazon search) you will find almost nothing on “Postmodern Marxism.” You will be rewarded, however, with books, articles, chapters and blogs on the differences and “the debate” between the two. Furthermore, those few scholars who theorize a synthesis of postmodernism and Marxism focus almost exclusively on economics, the new cyber

phenomena, or both, leaving psychological issues unexplored. This literature will not be reviewed here, but a few suggested readings on both the debate and the syntheses are given in the reference list.

As it is relevant to critical psychology, Postmodern Marxism refers to Newman and Holzman's methodology of social therapeutics. It is a practice that synthesizes elements of Marx's understanding of "man as social" and his dialectical method with elements of postmodern psychology, in particular, its understanding of relationality, language and meaning making, and its skepticism toward Truth.

At its beginning in the 1970s, this methodology drew heavily on the Marxist conceptions of alienation and class struggle. At the same time, descriptions of social therapy as "the practice of method" highlighted Marx as revolutionary methodologist more than Marx as political economist and revolutionary. The Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky continued Marx's revolutionary methodology by identifying, in different realms of social life, human beings as revolutionary, practical-critical, activists (or activity-ists). From the 1990s to the present day, postmodern critiques of modernist philosophy and psychology have influenced social therapeutics.

### **Key Words**

Commodification, alienation, performance, Vygotsky, Marx, revolutionary activity, class struggle, sociality, social therapeutics

### **Two Strains of Thought in Marx**

There are two lines of thought in Marx's writings: 1) class struggle (as in the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto*—"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles;" and 2) revolutionary activity (as in Marx's Third Thesis on Feuerbach—"The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary*

*practice.*” In Marx’s worldview, *class struggle* forefronts the anti-capitalist and deconstructive, while *revolutionary activity* forefronts the communistic and reconstructive. Together, they could transform “all existing conditions.”

Postmodern Marxism takes to heart the Marxian thesis that the transformation of the world and the transformation of ourselves as human beings are one and the same task. Further, since revolutionary activity is a fundamental human characteristic and carrying out revolutionary activity is necessary for ongoing individual and species development, postmodern Marxism relates to all people as revolutionaries—which means relating to people as world historic in everyday, mundane matters, that is, as social beings engaged in the life/history-making process of always *becoming*.

### **Method as Tool-and-Result**

Following Marx, Vygotsky posited a new conception of method, one that prefigured postmodernism in capturing the always emergent, or “becoming-ness,” of human beings: “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).

As monistically dialectical, tool-and-result points the way out of the objective-subjective and theory-practice dichotomies that have plagued Marxism, psychology and Marxist psychology. To the extent that contemporary human beings can become world historic or revolutionary, they must exercise their power as methodologists, that is, not merely users of the tools that are currently available but as collective creators of new tool-and-results.

### **Postmodern De-commodifying and De-alienating**

In the current economic, political and cultural climate, human beings have been socialized as commodified and alienated individuals. Mainstream psychology

relates to them as such, that is, as *who we are*, not as simultaneously *who we are and who we are becoming*. Transforming the current economic, political and cultural climate involves de-commodifying and de-alienating its human “products.” Neither negative nor destructive, it is the positive and constructive process of producing sociality by the continuous transformation of mundane specific life practices into new forms of life. Newman and Holzman’s Postmodern Marxist social therapeutic methodology is a *process ontology* in which human beings create new kinds of tools as the *becoming activity* of expressing—in how people live their lives—their sociality, adaptation to history, “species-life.”

This postmodern understanding of Marx dissolves the dualist gap between self and world, between thought and language, between who we are and who we are becoming, between theory and practice, in such a way that we can approach human beings as activists and activity-ists, as makers of meaning, rather than as knowers and perceivers. Further, it actualizes the postmodern critique of modernist psychology’s isolated individual through a new ontology—group activity. As a process ontology, a social-relational ontology, group activity raises a new set of questions and challenges for Marxists and postmodernists alike. For the unit of study becomes the social unit creating itself.

This shift in focus from the individual to the relationship or group exposes a problematic assumption of psychology: if it is individuals that perceive, read, problem solve, experience emotional distress or disorder, and so on, then the instruction, learning, teaching, treatment or therapy must be individuated. While group work in general and group therapy in particular might at first appear to be challenges and counter examples, typically the group is understood to be a context for individuals to learn and/or get help. In contrast, the process ontology of group activity suggests that individuals need to be organized as social units in order to carry out the tasks of learning and developing, not unlike countless other human endeavors in which people become organized as social units to get a specific job done.

The alienation that Marx describes—relating to the products of production severed from their producers and from the process of their production, that is, as commodities—is not limited to cars, loaves of bread and computers. It is the normal way of seeing and relating in contemporary Western culture. People relate to their lives, relationships, beliefs, feelings, culture, and so on, as things torn away from the process of their creation and from their creators. Social therapy’s process ontology, in which human beings are both who we are and who we are becoming, is a deconstruction-reconstruction of the ontology of modernist psychology in which human beings are commodified. And who we are becoming are creators of tools that can continuously transform mundane specific life practices (including those that produce alienation) into new forms of life. Creating these new kinds of tools is the *becoming activity* of creating/giving expression to our sociality.

Postmodern Marxism identifies language as both a source and site of contemporary alienation. Most languages (perhaps all extant languages) are constructed around and perpetuate the illusion of a world filled with commodities in competitive, comparative, causal and quantitative relationships. Accordingly, a postmodern Marxist practice involves carefully deconstructing language and helping people see the individuated, competitive, self-oriented commodified language with which they talk to and about themselves and each other. In participating in this process, people come to see the extent to which language leaves them separate from each other. This collective activity of glimpsing the actual production of alienation is de-alienating to the extent that this is possible in the current times.

### **Performing**

The human capacity to perform, to pretend and to play has been undervalued and understudied by psychology, but it has a central role in Postmodern Marxism. Within traditional psychology performance is best known as a tool for result (play as a way children practice social roles and performance in therapy as an instrument for interpretation or insight). The general idea behind psychodrama and drama therapy, for example, is that by “acting out” instead of “talking about” their lives, people will reveal things that they otherwise cannot or will not. Others use drama techniques to encourage

interpersonal relationships and group values as a way for people to learn how to express their problems with the group or a group member.

Postmodern psychology and psychotherapy, however, relate to performance in a more tool-and-result fashion. Social constructionists highlight the performatory aspects of subjectivity, agency, activity and human relations, narrativists work to expose the “storiness” of our lives and help people create their own (and, most often, better) stories, and collaborative therapists emphasize the dynamic and co-constructed nature of meaning. Psychologists within the cultural-historical tradition are also paying attention to performance and play. What is important in all this work is the *collaborative activity of performance*; the focus is on the ensemble activity of creating the performance rather than on interpreting what it “means.”

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## Online Resources

Eastsideinstitute.org  
Frednewmanphd.com  
Loisholzman.org  
Marxists.org  
Postmodernpsychology.com  
Postmoderntherapies.com

## **SOCIAL THERAPY LOIS HOLZMAN**

### **Introduction**

Social therapy (and the broader practice/theory of social therapeutics) is an approach to human development and learning that challenges many of psychology's and psychiatry's presuppositions: about persons; therapy, the therapeutic relationship and therapeutic discourse; illness, cure and treatment; emotions and cognition; and mind, body and brain. This orientation locates social therapy within the diverse grouping of non-medical model approaches that identify as postmodern, discursive, collaborative and/or social constructionist.

Most critical psychologies fault mainstream psychology for having misidentified its subject matter in one of three ways: 1) by treating a privileged subset as normative (identity-based critique); 2) by being based in and biased by a capitalist, sexist, Eurocentric world view (ideology-based critique); and/or 3) by misappropriating the natural and physical science method and its epistemological presuppositions (epistemologically-based critique). Social therapy takes another route. It adds an ontology-based critique based in the philosophy of language and of science. Among the many "critical psychology" philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein has had the most influence on current trends in psychology, particularly those with a postmodern sensibility, including social therapy.

As social therapy has evolved since the late 1970s, several intellectual traditions have informed the approach, but none more than those of Wittgenstein, Karl Marx and Lev Vygotsky. Their writings contribute to an understanding of the potential for ordinary people to effect radical social change and the subjective constraints that need to be engaged so as to actualize this potential. Social therapy has evolved as an unorthodox synthesis of these three seminal thinkers.

### **Key Words**

Marx, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, practical-critical activity, human development methodology, group therapy, emotions, individual-group dualism

### **History**

Created in the 1970s by American philosopher and social activist Fred Newman, social therapy is a practical-critical psychology, in Marx's sense of "revolutionary, practical-critical activity" (Marx & Engels, 1974/1970). Revolutionary, practical-critical activity—the social, communal and reconstructive activity of human beings exercising their power to transform the current state of things—makes individual and species development possible.

In its early years social therapy could be described as an ideology-based critical psychology; 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. Like other radical therapies of the time in the US and Great Britain, social therapy engaged the authoritarianism, sexism, racism, classism and homophobia of traditional psychotherapy.

However, from its beginning, social therapy also rejected the conceptions of explanation, interpretation, the notion of an inner self (that therapists and clients need to delve into) and other dualistic and otherwise problematic foundations of traditional psychology.

Newman's study of the philosophy of science and language, the foundations of mathematics, and Marxian dialectics were critical to the development of social therapy. So too was the "tool-and-result" methodology of Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978) and his insights into human development, learning, language, thought and play as fundamentally social activities. These ideas were contributed by Newman's collaborator, developmental psychologist Lois Holzman, who was active in the nascent field of cultural-historical psychology in which Vygotsky was playing a major role.

### **Inspirations**

Social therapy draws on the radically social humanism and methodology in Marx's early writings (e.g., *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*). For Marx, human beings are first and foremost social beings. The transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings is one and the same task: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*" (Marx and Engels, 1974/1970, p. 121).

Vygotsky brought Marx's insights to bear on the practical question of how human beings learn and develop. The unique feature of human individual, cultural and species development is human activity (qualitative and transformative) and not behavior change (particularistic and cumulative). Human beings do not merely respond to stimuli, acquire societally determined and useful skills, and adapt to the determining environment. The uniqueness of human social life is that we ourselves transform the determining circumstances. Newman and Holzman found Vygotsky's writings on cognitive development, play and language in early childhood relevant to emotional growth at all ages. According to Vygotsky, children learn and develop through being related to as beyond themselves, and being supported to play or perform, "a head taller" than they are. Thus, human development is not an individual accomplishment but a *socio-cultural activity*. Vygotsky was a forerunner to a new *psychology of becoming*, in which people experience the social nature of their existence and the power of collective creative activity in the process of making new tools for growth.

Wittgenstein challenged the foundations of philosophy, psychology and linguistics with his method of doing philosophy without foundations, theses, premises, generalizations or abstractions (Wittgenstein, 1958). He exposed the “pathology” embedded in language and in accepted conceptions of language, thoughts and emotions. Some see his work as therapy for philosophers. For Newman and Holzman, his method is relevant for ordinary people as well—versions of philosophical pathologies permeate everyday life and create intellectual-emotional muddles. As they wrote in *Unscientific Psychology: A Cultural-Performatory Approach to Understanding Human Life* (2006/1996):

His self-appointed task was to cure philosophy of its illness. (Ours, as we will try to show, is closer to curing "illness" of its philosophy.) We are all sick people, says Wittgenstein. No small part of what makes us sick is *how* we think (related in complicated ways to what we think and, even more fundamentally, to *that* we think or *whether* we think), especially how (that or whether) we think about thinking and other so-called mental processes and/or objects—something which we (the authors) think we (members of our culture) do much more than many of us like to think! It gets us into intellectual-emotional muddles, confusions, traps, narrow spaces; it torments and bewilders us; it gives us "mental cramps." 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? (p. 174).

Today, social therapy can best be described as a human development methodology at the leading edge of the critical and postmodern movements in psychology. It is a relational approach with a focus on emotional development and group creativity. Participants are related to as creators of their culture and ensemble performers of their lives—revolutionaries (with a small “r”) participating together in transformative practical-critical activity. ([ENREF 6](#) Newman & Holzman, 2006/1996).

## **A Practical-Critical Psychology**

Similar to other critical psychologies, social therapy challenges the conceptions of inner life and self that are foundational to mainstream psychology. In creating and glorifying the isolated individual as its unit of analysis, mainstream psychology adopted the philosophical position that particulars are what is “real” and that totalities are an abstraction. Social therapy contends that a major source of people’s emotional pain is the socially constructed notion and experience that emotions are particular mental states of isolated individuals (Holzman & Mendez, 2003). Therefore, in social therapy, helping people therapeutically means challenging them to relate to emotions as other than private mental states and to themselves as other than “particulars.”

The primary modality of social therapy is group because of its greater potential to challenge particularism and individualism than “individual” (one-on-one) psychotherapy. In social therapy, the group is the therapeutic unit. This is different from most group therapies, in which the group serves as a context for the therapist to help individuals with their emotional problems, but is not itself the therapeutic unit. Clients who come together to form a social therapy group are given the task to create their group as an environment in which they can get help. This *group activity* is a collective, practical challenge to the assumption that the way people get therapeutic help is to relate to themselves and be related to by others as individuals, complete with problems and with inner selves. It is in groups that a person’s felt experience of being the center of the universe (that nothing else is going on in the world except how one is feeling) can be most effectively and helpfully challenged.

The social therapist’s task is to lead the group in discovering/creating a method of relating to emotional talk relationally rather than individualistically. Talk becomes a collective meaning-making activity rather than a representation of reality or expression of inner feelings. In this process people come to appreciate what (and that) they can create, and simultaneously to realize the limitations of trying to learn and grow individually.

Group members, at different moments, realize that *growth comes from participating in the process of building the groups in which one functions*. The typical traditional therapeutic question, “How are you [each individual] feeling?” transforms to “How well is the group performing its activity?”

This shift in focus from the individual to the group is not a denial of the individual, but rather a reshaping and reorganization of what is traditionally related to as a dualistic and antagonistic relationship into a dialectical one. Mainstream psychology has tended to negate and disparage the group or reduce the group to the individual. Orthodox Marxism has tended to negate and disparage the individual or reduce the individual to the group. In recognizing and relating to the groupness of human life, social therapy does neither. The group is engaged in producing something collectively. As is the case with many life activities, individual members contribute to different degrees and in different ways. .

As a social therapy group creates itself as a group, it is generating new ways of talking that expose the more typical ways of talking, ways that perpetuate the experience of being individuated products. These social therapy groups thus become makers of meaning and not merely users of language; they play with language, as Wittgenstein says, as a form of life. To make more explicit the contribution that Wittgenstein’s critical psychology has made to social therapy, social therapy can be reframed in Wittgenstein’s terms. Social therapy is a method to help “ordinary people get free from some of the constraints of language and the conceptual confusions that permeate everyday life” (Newman and Holzman, 2006/1996).

Like Wittgenstein, Vygotsky challenged the expressionist, representational or correspondence view of language. Speaking, he said, is not the outward expression of thinking, but part of a unified, transformative process. 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. Any thought has movement. It unfolds. (Vygotsky, 1987)

With his conception of language and thought as dialectical process and unified activity, Vygotsky makes the psychological divide between inner and outer disappear. There are no longer two separate worlds, the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking. There is, instead, the complex dialectical unity, speaking/thinking, in which speaking completes thinking.

If speaking is the completing of thinking, as Vygotsky says, if the process is continuously creative in socio-cultural space, then it follows that the “completer” does not have to be the one who is doing the thinking. Others can complete for us. And when they do, they are no more saying what we are thinking than we are saying what we are thinking when we complete ourselves. What people are doing when they speak in a social therapy group is not saying what’s going on but creating what’s going on, and “understanding each other” comes about by virtue of engaging in this activity. In psychotherapy, whatever the modality, talking about one’s inner life is therapeutic because and to the extent that it is a socially complete activity and not a transmittal of private states of mind. The human ability to create with language—to complete, and be completed by, others—is a continuous process of creating who we are becoming, a tool-and-result of the activity of developing (Holzman, 2009).

Understanding language in this way as a socially complete activity raises questions about “the truth” of people’s words and, by extension, the concept of truth itself. There are different ways to question the concept of truth. One is to reject an expressionist view of language and with it the notion of objective truth. For those psychologists and psychotherapists who do so, talk therapy is not done in order to discover some hidden truth of someone’s life, to find the true cause of emotional pain or to apply the one true method of treatment, because truth in that form (Truth) does not exist. Instead, they construct subjective theories of truth and devise practices consistent with them. For example, social constructionists search for relational forms of dialogue as an alternative to objectivist-based debate and criticism; narrative therapists work to expose the “storiness” of our lives and help people create their own (and, most often, better) stories;

and collaborative therapists emphasize the dynamic and co-constructed nature of meaning.

However, from the social-therapeutic, practical-critical point of view, these critical psychology proposals are lacking. To posit truth as subjective, with the existence of multiple truths (all with a small “t”), does not escape objective-subjective dualism but rather merely flips it over. Truth may be socially constructed in these approaches, but dualism remains intact, as there must be something about which it can be said, “It is true (or false).” In contrast, relating to therapeutic talk as playing language games as a form of life in Wittgenstein’s sense, and as socially complete activity in Vygotsky’s and Newman and Holzman’s sense, is a rejection of truth and its opposite, falsity. The social therapeutic shift to activity is a way to transform therapeutic talk from being an appeal to or about both objective, outer reality Truth and subjective, inner cognitive or emotive truths. As socially complete activity, therapy talk is a consciously self-reflexive engagement of the creating of the talk itself. In performing therapy the fictional nature of “the truth” of our everyday language, our everyday psychology and our everyday stories gets exposed as people have the opportunity to experience themselves as the collective creators of their emotional activity.

### **Future Directions**

Social therapy has generated a fair amount of controversy, as might be expected of a philosophically informed postmodern Marxist practice developed outside of academia. Much of the controversy, however, stems from decades-old political attacks on Newman from the US Left, which tried to use the charge of “cult” leader to discredit his and others’ attempts to transform partisan politics in the US. Neither the substance of social therapy’s critique of mainstream psychology nor the specific ways in which social therapy is political have yet to be adequately studied or critiqued.

In the meantime, social therapy is practiced in social therapy centers (<http://socialtherapygroup.com>), clinics, schools, hospitals, social service organizations and NGOs in the US and abroad. Newman and Holzman’s East Side Institute provides

training to many hundreds of psychologists, social workers, health and mental health providers, researchers, educators and community activists across the globe. As a method for social-emotional growth and learning, the social therapeutic approach has been a model for innovative practices in education in school and outside of school and youth development, training and practice in medicine and healthcare, and organizational development and executive leadership. In addition to dozens of academic books and book chapters devoted to social therapy, numerous articles on the topic appear in such journals as *Theory & Psychology*, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, and *New Ideas in Psychology*.

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## ZONE OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

LOIS HOLZMAN

### Introduction

The zone of emotional development is a concept originated by Fred Newman and Lois Holzman to describe a characteristic of social therapy, a 35 year-old postmodern practice (Holzman, 2009; Newman & Holzman, 2004). The term is derived from Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (shortened to 'zpd' in the US, 'zoped' elsewhere), the concept critical to Vygotsky's assertion that learning and development are a unity in which learning dialectically "leads" development (Vygotsky, 1987) p. 211).

**Definition**

Zone of emotional development is the relational activity of creating a group's therapy and the emotional development that is generated during the group's creation.

**Key Words**

Vygotsky's zpd, social therapy, group therapy, group-individual dualism, activity, the language of emotions, cognitive bias, dialectic

**Traditional Debates**

In traditional psychology emotion is located within the individual and emotional development is understood teleologically in terms of stages (e.g., Erikson's eight crises of psychosocial development). Interest in emotional development has greatly increased in the past three decades, often linked as social-emotional development. Emotions are related to behavioristically and normatively, for example, by identifying the ages at which children should become able to regulate their emotions and learn the social-cultural rules of emotional expression. Emotions are viewed through a cognitively-biased lens, seen as products of certain cognitions (hence, cognitive-emotive and cognitive behavioral therapies). Recent discoveries in neuroscience pertaining to emotion have been used by many psychologists to support a regulatory objective. There is little discussion within traditional psychology, even at its fringes, of the possibility that emotion might be social (both in origin and essence), have an inseparable relation to cognition, and be a life-span phenomenon of continuous social-cultural creation.

**Critical Debates**

One direction for a critical psychology approach to emotions and emotional development to take is to challenge the pervasive cognitive bias that separates emotions from cognition, treats emotion as more primitive, feminine and therefore inferior to cognition and in need of control or regulation, and as the possession of individuals. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development has positively influenced a psychotherapeutic practice, social therapy, which takes this direction.

While Vygotsky is best known within the fields of education, learning theory and developmental psychology, his critique of dualism encompassed all of psychology. The separation of emotion from cognition was, to him, a basic defect of traditional psychology that generated “a one-sided view of the human personality.” He proposed, instead, that they were a dialectical unity, with neither inferior to the other (Vygotsky, 1983). That his view has not been taken up broadly among psychologists concerned with emotional development or psychotherapists is due, in part, to the very cognitive-emotive divide he challenged, and to the strong cognitive bias in psychology.

The zpd is discussed at different times and in multiple translations of Vygotsky’s writings. [In an essay historically situating certain of Vygotsky’s ideas, Glick points out how English-language volumes of Vygotsky’s work published at different times present a different Vygotsky - and a different zpd (Glick, 2004)]. Consequently, contemporary Vygotskians have varying understandings of the zpd.

Vygotsky characterized the development of/in the zpd as “a function of collective behavior, as a form of cooperation or cooperative activity” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 202) in which children do what they do not yet know how to do by virtue of their social activity. He described this as “the child’s potential to move from what he is able to do to what he is not” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 212). Building on this, for Newman and Holzman the social therapeutic zpd is a collective activity whereby the group creates the “zone” (therapeutic environment) and simultaneously creates their emotional development. They view social therapy groups as the activity of groupings of people working together and creating the “zone of emotional development” that *is* their new emotionality (their learning-leading-development). As in the zpd of childhood described by Vygotsky, people at different levels of experience and skill employ a creative methodology of producing environments in which they organize and reorganize their relationships to themselves, each other and to the tools (both material and psychological) and objects of their world. They construct “zones” that allow them *to become*. In the case of children and their caregivers it is done without conscious effort, while in therapy groups it takes considerable conscious effort.

Social therapy groups conducted in centers for social therapy in the US are comprised of 10-25 people, a mix of women and men of varying ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, class backgrounds and economic status, professions and “presenting

problems.” The groups are consciously heterogeneous for two reasons: 1) to challenge people’s notion of a fixed identity (e.g., based on gender, ethnicity, diagnostic label, or “That’s the kind of person I am”); and 2) the more diverse the elements, the more material there is with which to create. Hundreds of people from different countries have trained in social therapy and practice in a structure and manner that is coherent with their specific cultural environments and differs from the above snapshot in varying ways.

People come to social therapy, as they do to any therapy or any group setting, individuated and wanting help to feel better or to change. They relate to feelings as individuated and private, which contributes to people feeling isolated and alone with the “possession” of their feelings. They look to the therapist for some advice, solution, interpretation, or explanation. The social therapist works with the group (rather than the individuated selves that comprise the group) to organize itself as an emotional zpd, helping the group discover a method of relating to emotional talk relationally rather than individualistically, and as activist rather than as representational. The focus of the social therapeutic group process is, “How can we talk so that our talking helps build the group?” Speaking as truth telling, reality representing, inner thought and feeling revealing are challenged as people attempt to converse in new ways and to create something new out of their initial individuated, problem-oriented presentations of self.

This shift in focus from the individual to the group is a reshaping and reorganization of what is traditionally related to as a dualistic and antagonistic relationship between individual and group into a dialectical one. Mainstream psychology has tended to negate the group or reduce the group to the individual. Mainstream Marxism has tended to negate the individual or reduce the individual to the group. In recognizing the groupness of human life, social therapy does not negate individuals. The group is engaged in producing something collectively and, as with many life activities, individual members contribute to different degrees and in different ways.

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### **Online Resources**

- East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy <http://eastsideinstitute.org>
- The Community Therapist <http://communitytherapist.com>
- The Vygotsky Internet Archive <http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/index.htm>