

HOW TO CREATE SOCIAL ACTIVISM: TURNING THE PASSIVE TO ACTIVE WITHOUT KILLING EACH OTHER

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ABSTRACT This paper describes our efforts to organize a group of psychotherapists to apply their knowledge toward social justice activism. This organizing required us to look at our surrounding US culture of consumer capitalism and reflect upon how its ideology worked with the Bush administration's exploitation of fear to garner public support for imperialist actions. We wanted to apply what we know about the unconscious dynamics of trauma and attachment to understand how citizens were being manipulated by the government and what they would be looking for in their national leaders. Lastly, we discuss the pressures on our evolving group from within as well as from the surrounding culture, and assess our successes and the places where we could have used from more reflection. While we focus on psychoanalysts, we suggest that particular group dynamics are intensified when members of a group are all culled from one profession.

Key words: trauma, group dynamics, social responsibility, social unconscious

THE HISTORY OF THE GROUP

On a cold January morning in 2002, in a room overflowing with participants, a panel of psychoanalysts discussed the US response to 9/11. It was 7 a.m. and the IARRP (International Association of Relational and Related Psychotherapies) had added the panel to its conference. The attendance signaled an important need on the part of therapists to form a community in order to discuss the impact of 9/11 and US policies on the profession, and how we could collectively respond.

This chapter is a synopsis of the efforts we made to create a group of psychothera-

pists to work for socially responsible action; to support each other in holding the growing pain and trauma of our patients and ourselves; and to generate a relevant, non-reductive analysis of the government's tactics of manipulating fear, warmongering and closing the possibility for public reflection and dissent. We will describe how we organized, the activities and community work we initiated, as well as our understanding of why our task was difficult in the face of American ideology and how that ideology impacted on us as a group. Last we will look at the internal psychodynamics that challenged us as a group.

Therapists mobilize after 9/11

In New York City, mental health workers immediately mobilized to respond to 9/11. Individually professionals went to firehouses, police stations, hospitals and places of worship. Therapists also participated in institutionally organized efforts with Safe Horizon (a victims' service agency) and the Red Cross on phone banking (calling victims' families with service information) and assisting at sites designated for survivors and victims' families. Training institutes, clinics and graduate programs were contacted by unions and financial companies from the World Trade Center to work with survivors. Therapists were also contacted to go on site visits with survivors and family members in order to help process the experience. Indeed, therapists were thoroughly involved in the post-traumatic effort. However, we, too, were affected. As the identified processors of the traumatic experience for our patients and the community, we were often overwhelmed. This trauma was exponentially heightened by the aggression exercised by the government and what we experienced as a crackdown on efforts to symbolize and speak what was going on.

In the aftermath of 9/11, our President was granted the power to make war without congressional approval. The government quickly attacked US citizens' civil rights with the Patriot Act and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA),¹ each of which attacked the right to privacy, freedom of speech and religion, and

enabled the arrest, detention and deportation of thousands of people, many of whom were US citizens. Daily security alerts and details of potential terrorist plots crammed the news, heightened fear and created conditions for a perpetual post-traumatic atmosphere. The President's language of good versus evil created a frightening sense of national victimization that supported his 'pre-emptive' war and, simultaneously, collapsed any potential space for public reflection. In this atmosphere, negotiation and peaceful action was spurned as unpatriotic and potentially compromising to the security of the country. A reflective and thoughtful response was equated with weakness and even with support for terrorism.

As therapists, we understood the power and danger of splitting off aggression in order to be identified as the good, virtuous victim. We knew that collapsing potential space limits reflection, thinking and the capacity to question. In this atmosphere all wrongdoing on behalf of the US, for example the history of our support for dictators in the Middle East, could be erased, as the Taliban and then Iraq and others were cast as the 'evil enemy' who threatened us. It was this cycle of generating and perpetuating vulnerability, fear, aggression, and limiting reflection that most frightened us. As professionals who work to speak the unspeakable, we believed we had an expertise and a responsibility to analyse the mechanisms of the unconscious dynamics of power and control underlying popular support for the Bush administration. This

¹ The HIPAA, like many of the Bush administration's mandates (such as the No Child Left Behind and the Clean Air Acts) supposedly promises to protect citizen's liberties, social services and the environment but actually endangers them and places corporate/government interests first. The HIPAA was initially created under President Clinton to protect patient records. However, under President Bush, HIPAA required electronic transmission of all patient records. Under the application of the Patriot Act, this facilitated and justified government surveillance of medical and psychiatric records, compromising the confidentiality of patients and healthcare providers.

included finding ways of counteracting how the government invaded our psyches on a daily basis by using fear as a tactic of oppressive control. We also discussed when and how to bring politics into the analytic relationship. Lastly, we explored how to expand the analytic vision from being an exclusively individualistic form of inquiry, to one more responsive to the escalating political situation and the 'large group' (societal) psychodynamics it created.

From this discussion, we identified a core of 15 people who were interested in forming a steering committee to focus the creation of a unique group that would work towards socially responsible theory and action. We hoped to create an organization similar to Physicians for Social Responsibility, with an inclusive membership dedicated to analysing and acting in the larger political scene without having to cater to the interests of a larger and more conservative professional umbrella organizations.

OUR ACTIONS

The steering committee immediately reached out to other socially critical and/or activist psychotherapists in order to organize a larger group that would share the following goals:

- To create a potential space for therapists to talk to one another about frightening current events and the relationship of politics to emotional life.
- To educate people within the profession about the Bush administration's policies in order to mobilize socially responsible action opposing US aggression, governmental attacks on our standard of living, social services and civil liberties from the perspective of the knowledge and moral commitment we shared as therapists.

A speak out for psychotherapists

We began with a speak out about 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, which was well attended and inspiring. We created a space in which, one by one, people could come up to an open microphone to have the opportunity to hear their own voices and the voices of their colleagues expressing fear, dismay, dissent and alternative visions. The speak out is a frame, a ritual space like the analytic or psychotherapeutic session, where the unthinkable can more safely be thought and put into words. This speak out was our attempt to help the community symbolize what was not being said. It worked.

Launching a new group

We followed the speak out with a developmental meeting where the organization was founded in a more public way. Two members prepared position papers, coalescing the thoughts of the group as a whole, which analysed the political crisis from both political-economic and psychodynamic perspectives. These papers, on our Web site now, were both very well received. They seemed to speak, in one way or another, for everyone in attendance.

With the hope and excitement generated we organized six committees for membership participation:

- a media committee to bring our message to the media;
- a committee to study and teach about non-violence as a strong form of 'action';
- a committee to contribute to the peace process in the Middle East;
- a committee for community outreach;
- a committee to link us to the larger peace movement (especially United for Peace and Justice);

- a committee to organize peer discussion groups – consciousness-raising groups for therapists.

Educational meetings

- We showed the movie *The Hidden Wars of Desert Storm*. Well over 100 people came and there was a rich discussion.
- We brought in speakers to talk about The Patriot Act and to highlight the way it would affect psychotherapy through HIPAA, which was threatening the rights to privacy for both patients and therapists. While there were many seminars on ‘how to’ comply with HIPAA, this program was a critique of it. Our attendance decreased for this meeting.

Uniting psychotherapists in larger protests

Our group also co-sponsored and participated in many protests. For each protest we created a meeting space specifically for psychotherapists to walk together under the banner ‘Peace of Mind – Psychotherapists for Social Responsibility’. We participated in many local and national protests including the world-wide effort of 11 February 2003.

Online Web conferences, discussion and Web site

Our group also worked with PsyBC to organize an international Web conference. This was an attempt to politicize the profession around the way in which the social unconscious and the personal unconscious intersect in two particular ways:

- how and why sectors of the population at large respond to, identify with or oppose the politics of fear and aggression;
- how these politics find their way into or are avoided in our clinical work.

PsyBC also donated space on their Internet educational service to post announcements, meetings, protest information, educational facts, news updates, and facilitated general conversation among members between meetings. This space grew into our own current Web page, www.pfsr.org (Psychotherapists for Social Responsibility). The Web site offers versions of position papers written by a number of our members. (The online discussion can be seen in the PsyBC archives.)

Joining the Professionals for Social Responsibility network

We immediately became a member of the Professional Network of for Social Responsibility (PNSR), which was the umbrella lobbying organization for Physicians for Social Responsibility, Architects for Social Responsibility, economists, educators, Quaker Friends, and other groups. In addition we met with the national group Psychologists for Social Responsibility and tried to coordinate our activities.

Joining the election effort

As the election neared in the winter of 2003, with a smaller number of people attending our events, the steering committee merged into the whole group so that whoever wanted to attend meetings could. We began focusing primarily on the presidential election. We developed and published a position paper describing the kind of leadership we believed would benefit the country. We tried to get this paper into the Democratic Party in order to influence and support the candidates. We also made this position paper available to our members to use in their own local election efforts. We worked with the Kerry Campaign and MoveOn to organize phone

banking and bus trips to swing states to help defeat President Bush.

Prior to the election we held another speak out about our fears and hopes about the election and to mobilize action towards defeating President Bush. Although the discussion was profound, it was not as well attended as earlier events.

After the extremely disappointing election we organized another meeting as a way of mobilizing people. This event was not well attended. However, a group of about 15 or 20 continues to meet – a largely different membership from the original group. It is looking for a focus for its efforts.

WHAT WE WERE UP AGAINST: THE MERGER OF POLITICS WITH THE AMERICAN CONSUMER CULTURE IDEOLOGY

We attempted to organize psychotherapists within a particular cultural atmosphere. We had come together in the crisis of 9/11 and the administration's subsequent exploitation of citizens' fear. We all agreed that the manipulation of public opinion was designed to frighten people into feeling like innocent victims who would be best and most safely served by a strong uncompromising leader who would stand firm and fight for them by making war. That fight, and the all-out aggression that it took, breaking with international law, was justified by the governmental promotion of a state of mind of a Kleinian (Klen, 1946) paranoid-schizoid bifurcation of good and bad. Here 'the good freedom loving Americans' would exist only because the government took on the 'axis of evil'. Moreover, taking on this evil would not only save us – it would actually make us righteous defenders of democracy first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. With the media being carefully orchestrated to support the government's agenda (see

Outfoxed, the film by Robert Greenwald, mediamatters.org, and *Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq* (Rampton and Stauber, 2003) to name only a few), and the incapacity of the Democratic Party to fully expose this corporate takeover inherent in the Bush domestic and international agenda, alternative forms of leadership did materialize.

Beyond the explanatory power of these realities, we wanted to use our perspective to wonder about how people could support the further militarization of the economy against their own interests, at the expense of the stability of the dollar, social services like healthcare, education, social security and environmental protection and industrial development to provide jobs at home. In writing this article we want to propose that this ideological coup could not have been achieved without the underlying subjectivity characterized by the particular form of commodity fetishism of our time. This ideology inhibits people from seeing the class-based power dynamics (including gender, race, ethnicity) within which they are embedded. More particularly, it inhibits people from seeing

- the links between themselves and their political-economic culture; and
- their own potential power to affect their larger social world.

As Marx theorized, in capitalism, social relationships of production are mystified: labor is hidden and the conditions of labor are hidden; in the world of huge conglomerates in which we live, the seller too is hidden and the relationship between those who own the corporations and those who work for them and buy from them are all obscured. But the unique quality of fetishism in this century and especially as it

is shared in this country is that the goal of consumerism is not bound by the product. We do not simply buy products, we buy lifestyle. And that lifestyle is meant to become our sense of self and self in relation to others. Thus, we can all appear equal, based on the capacity to consume – ‘the democratization of surfaces’ (Ewen and Ewen, 1979). What used to be a Calvinist work ethic has now morphed into the very recreation of self and body through consumption. Our work now is to create character and identity through the consumption and display of a lifestyle of which we can be proud. Body alterations and attitudes are sought in a never-ending attempt to recreate oneself anew into an improved self, a self with power, a self above all, beyond contempt. And in the US after 9/11, that self is neither vulnerable nor guilty. This new ‘safe’ self is part of an undifferentiated mass, created not only by the exploitation of fear described earlier, but also by the exploitation of commodity fetishism.

After 9/11, President Bush and New York City Mayor Giuliani told people of the US to go shopping to show their patriotism, to actively strengthen the economy, to enjoy themselves and not ‘give over’ to ‘what the terrorists wanted’. Flags showed up everywhere: on highway billboards advertising supermarkets, health insurance, cell phones, and so forth; on stores of all kinds, and then on public buildings, cars and homes. American public life was simultaneously filled with the combination of color-coded threat levels, the drive to war and flags associated with products, businesses and family life. Inherent in this combination bombarding our unconsciousness and conscious experience was the notion that we would be safe and strong, proud to be American, primarily through our allegiance to the government and to the products for which it stands.

Splitting other countries into good versus evil, the use of fear, and the commodity fetishism whereby one guarantees safety by purchasing patriotism, all supported the culture’s paranoid/schizoid position. When operating from this Kleinian position, one is impeded in one’s capacities to reflect, think or to hold complex ideas. Without these capacities, the media holds even more power than usual to create and sway public opinion. When people cannot reflect and think, media are swallowed whole, with no digestion or analysis. This created an atmosphere where parroting the corporate media became a form of dialogue.

As analytic psychotherapists who were concerned about the intersection of individual and social unconscious experience, we thought it was imperative that our profession observe and find some way to intervene.

SOME DIFFICULTIES MOBILIZING PSYCHOTHERAPISTS IN THIS ENVIRONMENT

Psychotherapists have shared values of honesty and ethical responsibility and the charge to create ways of speaking what has been rendered unspeakable by the patient’s respective history. However, we all exist within this culture of performative identity and lifestyle perfection that depends upon ‘attacks on linking’ (Bion, 1959). Additionally, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in particular, have been preoccupied by a notion of clinical neutrality that destroys the links between the personal, the cultural, and the political. So we were faced with quite a challenge: how do we create these links within our own professional community while helping to create this capacity within the larger surrounding community?

Our plan of action was to illuminate the connection between the political situation and individual suffering. We hoped that

speaking and articulating these links would support the capacity to grieve and mourn, and then from this depressive position we could take responsible non-retaliatory action. As we found, these goals were easier to theorize than to enact.

External pressures of professional dynamics and hierarchies

As a new group we faced not only the cultural attacks on linking but also those of our professions. To begin we must provide a brief description of some of the hierarchies that have constituted the evolution of the mental health field in the US. First, there are distinct splits between the degreed professions of psychiatry, psychology, social work, and masters level creative arts therapies (such as art, drama, music, dance). Psychiatry, with its basis in medical science, is the most esteemed. Psychologists with licensed PhD status are next, followed by non-licensed psychologists. Licensed social workers and non-licensed social workers follow, with creative arts therapists last. Now, in writing this we are not casting a judgment on the value of these practitioners, only describing what tends to be a hierarchy within our own profession and the US culture at large. This hierarchy is reinforced by our privatized insurance system that defines which practitioners will be covered (licensed only, for the most part) and how much each is worth per session. These professions are quite literally ranked by a monetary value defined by insurance companies. As of this writing, psychoanalysts are working toward being licensed.

This stratification is reinforced by very separate educational tracks, training, and level of terminal degree: masters degree for creative arts therapies and social work; doctorate for psychology and some social workers; and medical degree for

psychiatrists. While white women and people of color have broken into the higher ranks of psychology and psychiatry, both these professions continue to be dominated by whites, and men constitute the majority of psychiatrists. Social workers and other master's level practitioners are the most diverse ethnically, racially and by class, and are predominantly female. Although institutes may accept people with any of these degrees for psychoanalytic training, they continue to be dominated by white, upper middle-class practitioners.

Each of these professions emerges from distinct theoretical ideologies and training practices that are quite diverse. However, because any licensed practitioner must diagnose according to the DSM, a psychiatric view dominates. Psychiatry emerges from a medical epistemology, where there is an institutionalized destruction of links based on the notion of individual pathology. For instance, the established etiology of eating disorders describes them as resulting from a person's inability to deal with stress or adequately regulate affect. Links to a misogynist cultural atmosphere and commercial exploitation of skeletal beauty ideals are destroyed. So despite variations in graduate training, the epistemology that supports mental health practice in the US views psychological distress as individual pathology with no links to the social system, the dynamics of which remain hidden.

But this attack on linking to the social does not end with diagnostic categories. The attack is most virulent in the concept of neutrality, which considers political content to be inappropriate in the clinical setting. The psychotherapist who brings in politics is considered invasive and the patient who does so is seen as avoiding talking about personal issues. Additionally, most psychoanalytic journals have considered politics

and culture superfluous and shallow, we think, as a defensive reaction against exposing the social unconscious.

All mental health professionals face the opposition of the US culture that has a particular disdain for the unconscious, the unknown, and the uncontrollable. United States capitalist culture has created a distorted pragmatism where only concrete material experience matters, and anti-intellectual and anti-analytic attitudes flourish. Here reflective thinking is considered elitist, and analysing issues or ones life is considered a waste of time. This cultural tendency became only more entrenched with the government's policies of fear and unreflective action, outlined earlier. All of these external dynamics came to play in the difficult task of reaching out to psychotherapists. As we found, seeing the power dynamics of the culture threatens one's sense of the world. It requires critically rethinking one's theoretical and clinical stance, an upsetting prospect to many.

Internal pressures: let's not talk about it

Our steering committee as well as the group at large, included representatives from a variety of educational backgrounds. As a group of professionals, these identities were always present in the room with our names (quite literally if our email contacts included titles of Dr, Professor, MD or PhD).

Additionally, we had the politics of institutes. New York City is home to numerous psychoanalytic training institutes from a variety of theoretical backgrounds and each has garnered a different level of respect and visibility within the field. Because the steering committee was created at a convention of the IARPP (International Association of Relational Psychotherapists and Psychoanalysts), and the New York University postdoctoral program was

central to the development of the IARPP, our steering committee already had a built-in dynamic to deal with: that between members of NYU and the others. Thus, as members we had our names, our degrees, as well as our institutional affiliations each contributing to defining our group membership. While not always conscious or gross, these dynamics impacted people's felt power in the group.

There were also hierarchies of publishing and public reputation, related to years in the field. As a social responsibility group, we had an additional hierarchy of activist experience: who had been to which protests and who had engaged in and lived through which social movements. These various hierarchical identities served as a vehicle for typical group dynamics and power struggles. The leadership that emerged was based not only on transference and personal histories but also along these hierarchies. Given this conflation of professional identity and political experience with personal and group dynamics, authority became more difficult to address or challenge for some, and more seductive to topple as a professional Oedipal victory for others. Each person's historical relationship to authority, be it competitive, envious, or powerless, was magnified. This dynamic is probably inevitable in any professional grouping. We were unprepared to deal with it effectively.

Balancing the dialectic between the real need for strong leadership while creating the conditions for members to grow and be active participants was something we had difficulty conceptualizing, discussing and maintaining. For example, it was a struggle for younger, less esteemed members to assert themselves in order to be heard and recognized in the face of more professionally esteemed members who took leadership to shape the message of the group.

This struggle limited the capacity of the group to function as well as it might have, and actually caused an attrition of membership in the steering committee.

As a steering committee we did not fully discuss how we might address internal issues, nor how we would strike the balance between being a task-oriented group while maintaining group morale through the necessary processing of internal dynamics. There was also contention about the steering committee itself. Some believed we should merge immediately into a larger group for the sake of inclusion, while others felt developing a core leadership subgroup would best create the conditions for a functioning larger group.

With these unprocessed dynamics pulsing through the steering committee, group tasks began to be organized in such a way that certain members did the more manual/secretarial ('female') work whereas others did the intellectual ('male') labor. This worked very well for some people and caused a conflict for others. Reproducing cultural hierarchies, the intellectual labor defined a form of individualistic leadership. Although the intellectual labor was initiated and overseen by professionally established members of the group at large, there were attempts to delegate these tasks. For instance, a younger member was asked to organize the PsyBC Web site, which brought with it both writing and administrative responsibilities. By delegating tasks into committees, we attempted to engage more diverse voices in writing outreach statements and think pieces. Still, because we were struggling with the group issues described above, our desperation to shake US voters out of their media-induced trance in order to create a public potential space for reflection, and our desire to be received as a credible

and legitimate organization, we had difficulty balancing quality control with censorship.

These undigested dynamics infected the large group around the steering committee, contributing to divisive splits along a variety of lines. First, was the issue of the theoretical analysis we wanted to use to advertise the group. On the one side were the members struggling to create an astute, generative, non-reductive analysis and critique of the government's use of fear and force to cohere the public and anesthetize dissent. On the other side were members who felt alienated by the psychoanalytic language used in the critique. For them, this emphasis would hinder outreach to mental health workers from more diverse settings. This split was evident in our struggle to name ourselves: Psychoanalysts for Social Responsibility, or Psychotherapists and Mental Health Professionals for Social Responsibility.

Then there was the issue of class. Some felt the centrality of capitalism in our analysis necessitated a critique of our class system, whereas others felt this critique was too heavy-handed and polemical. Even though we were appealing to practitioners who were politically liberal, not all would welcome a challenge to the ideological notion that the US is a classless society with 'equal' opportunity for all. After all, most of our group members were self-employed psychoanalysts who had class privilege but not necessarily great economic stability or protection from market forces.

Class was also a divisive element within the steering committee itself. In New York City, planning events and finding meeting spaces can be a full-time, entrepreneurial endeavor. Often members of the steering committee had to forward a large sum of money with faith that enough people would attend the meeting and donate money to

cover the charge. When there was a loss, the steering committee initially split the cost. For some members this was a financial problem that was embarrassing to discuss. Although we were deconstructing the competitive spirit of the culture, it was still difficult not to feel humiliation if one could not equally share the financial burden of social responsibility.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, as our outreach expanded and our events and activities garnered more public recognition, we found ourselves with more people who wanted to participate in shaping the mission and policies of the group. For example, many people wrote statements to be sent to the media. There was no clear chain of command for quality control in order to guarantee the consistency of the message. Some people were hurt and annoyed with editing done by the steering committee, while others just sent letters directly to newspapers and community groups in a spontaneous and helpful way.

While our group interfaced with many organizations on protests, phone banks and voter registration drives in different states, the group lost some of its original spark. The hopeful energy and incisive thoughtfulness regardless of the negative elements of the group dynamics dissipated. So, as the presidential election neared and the desperation for political change mounted, members found themselves over-committed or/and additionally involved in organizations with the potential for more direct action. After protesting the war and working so hard on turning the election, feeling defeated was inevitable. Added to the political sadness was that of having lost the surge of the excited response among psychotherapists that we had for the previous 2 years. However, a smaller group of members emerged as the constant group. This current

group is comprised of approximately 20 active members who meet regularly and an e-mail discussion list that includes 300 national and international members.

THE OTHER SIDE OF DEFEAT? SUCCESSFULLY MOBILIZING FOR LASTING SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In the process of writing this paper, the two of us were granted the opportunity to analyse what we succeed in creating and the ways in which the group could have been stronger and more effective. Nonetheless, as a professional organization, we continue to be unique. As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, we sought to form a group that would be independent from training institutes and schools, and we did that. We have evolved into a loosely organized large group of mental health professionals, committed to critically speaking out, and we are aligned with national and international organizations that are working toward social change. We manage a Web site advertising our own events and those of other related organizations. Thus, we succeeded in meeting our initial goals. We have become psychotherapists not only to individuals in distress but to a cultural family that is being battered by government deception, the physical violence of war, and the violence and neglect that result from capitalist militarism, including underfunded social programs and schools, and a growing number of impoverished communities here at home.

In essence, the evolution of the group created a space to publicly grieve both 9/11 and the resulting actions taken by our government, enabling a transformation of loss into social mourning and collective action. As psychotherapists we joined together in protests, demonstrations and wrote a number of position and clinical papers (available on

our Web site). We do not know, but as of this writing we are observing a number of institute activities focused on our traumatogenic political environment. We hope we were some small part of expanding this public potential space and ushering new voices into US psychoanalytic discourse.

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