

Practicing Method: Social Therapy as Practical–Critical Psychology

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ABSTRACT *What Marx referred to as “practical–critical, revolutionary practice” has been shaped into a human development practice of method, that is, social therapeutics, and its psychotherapy, social therapy. Both entail the communal and reconstructive activity of human beings exercising their power qualitatively to transform the current state of things, the transformation of the world and of ourselves being one and the same task. This practice is discussed as an ontological critique of mainstream psychology and psychotherapy, representing a move from critical (opposition, resistance, and destruction or deconstruction) to practical–critical (creating something new out of what exists, reconstruction/deconstruction). Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: practical–critical; methodology; dialectics; tool-and-result; practice of method; Marx; Vygotsky; Wittgenstein; social therapy

Throughout its history, Marxism has been taken as an ideology. For a small but growing number of people around the world, Marxism is also – or alternatively – a methodology, and specifically, a methodology of human development. Leaving for others the topic of Marxism as ideology, this article focuses on Marxist-influenced psychological practice at the methodology end of the ideology–methodology spectrum. It is based on a symposium entitled “From Critical to Practical–Critical Psychology: Activating and Developing People and Community in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States”, which was presented at the Second Marxism and Psychology Conference held in Morelia, Mexico, in 2012. For the symposium I was joined by two activist scholars who work with young people and adults in poor communities: Wellington de Oliveira from the Acting Citizens Program in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and Miguel Cortes from Centro de Asesoría y Promoción Juvenil and Centro Fred Newman para la Terapia Social, both in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. While differing from each other in important culturally specific ways, the projects of these colleagues, as well as the US-based All Stars Project and East Side Institute in New York, with which I am involved, share an understanding of what Marx (1888/1973) termed “revolutionary, practical–critical activity” (p. 121) as the social, communal and reconstructive activity of human beings

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exercising their power to transform the current state of things, the transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings are one and the same task (Holzman, 2009). Each project invites participants to create new collective performances through which they and their communities can transform cognitively and emotionally, inseparable from social and cultural transformation. The methodological synthesis of Marxism and psychology consists of Marx's philosophical insights concerning dialectics as human activity, and aspects of critical, socio-cultural and postmodern psychologies. This synthesis represents a move from a critical to a practical–critical orientation, that is, from opposition and resistance to building new possibilities out of what exists. In this article, I locate this practical–critical orientation historically and describe social therapy.

In the practical–critical psychology of Fred Newman, myself and our followers, known as social therapeutics, dialectics is practiced as method (Newman & Holzman, 1993/2014, 1997; Holzman, 2009). *The practice of method* involves, among other things, continually creating and recreating institutions that challenge the foundational assumptions of these institutions, be they political, cultural, educational, or psychological. Some examples from the 35-year history of organizing in which Newman and I have been involved in the USA are:

- A school for children that denied the individuated, knowledge-seeking model of learning
- Social therapy centers with an approach to emotional help that denies the premises of mainstream psychotherapy
- A labor union for unorganized labor; that is, welfare recipients who did not labor and, therefore, were at no point of production
- A university that is free, open to everyone who wants to participate, and has no grades or degrees
- A national network of talent shows for youth that denies the bourgeois conception of talent
- Electoral political campaigns that are not concerned with winning and political parties that exist to redefine politics and transform political culture, including the possibility of doing away with political parties as the primary mode of citizen participation.

Until his death in 2011, Newman and I, along with our colleagues in psychology, social work, theatre, community organizing, youth work, and education, organized thousands to participate in creating developmental projects in culture, psychology, education and politics, and simultaneously continued to advance the articulation of the methodology we were creating – a methodology most influenced by the work of Karl Marx (1818–1883), Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), which we identify as a postmodernization of Marxism (Newman & Holzman, 1996/2006, 1997, 2003).

The goal of these projects is to inspire, invite and help people to practice method, to create new forms of life, and to build environments that are at the same time the context for revolutionary activity and revolutionary activity itself. This activity is a reconstruction–deconstruction of the capitalist ontology in which human beings are understood to be only *who we are*. Who we are, especially those in late capitalist culture, are commodified and alienated individuals: the products of a sick society to which we have adapted. Transforming this sick society involves the de-commodification and de-alienation of its human “products”. This is neither negative nor destructive, but rather the positive and constructive process of producing sociality. In the *process ontology* of practicing method, human beings are both

who we are and *who we are becoming*. Who we are becoming are creators of tools that can “abolish the present state of things” by the continuous transformation of mundane specific life practices into new forms of life. Creating these new kinds of tools is the *becoming activity* of expressing, in how we live our lives, our sociality, our adaptation to history, our “species-life”, as Marx referred to it. It is a participatory process in which people exercise their collective power to create new environments and new ways of relating to themselves, each other and the world.

FROM CRITICAL TO PRACTICAL–CRITICAL

In addition to the above articulation, it might help to clarify practical–critical psychology by taking a look at critical psychology. Elsewhere, I have distinguished between three types of critical psychology: identity-based, ideology-based, and epistemology-based critical psychologies (Holzman, 2013). In articulating this, it should be noted that my reference point is the USA and the brief history provided here is of American psychology, as that is what I know.

Identity-based psychologies

Here we find psychologies that are mainly critical of how mainstream psychological theory and/or method exclude, ignore or misrepresent vast groupings of people by virtue of psychology’s unquestioned allegiance to white, Indo-European males as normative. In the USA these psychologies stem from the political movements of the 1960s, including the Black power movement, La Raza (Latino power), women’s liberation, and gay liberation. Black, feminist and gay psychologies were developed (primarily by African American, women, and lesbians and gay men, respectively), with psychological conceptions, practices and research agendas specific to what were thought to be the unique characteristics, needs and societal restrictions (oppression) of each grouping.

Ideology-based psychologies

While these psychologies support the empowerment and liberation of identity groups, they do so more from an ideological than an explicit identity position. All anti-capitalist ideologies fall into this category. While Marxism is the most prominent, others of note (little discussed in the USA, however) are Marxist-feminist critique, postcolonial critique, and liberation psychology. The anti-capitalist ideological critique of psychology that has arisen in the USA and Europe concerns the ways that psychology supports the status quo by socializing its citizens to a capitalist ideology. A case in point is Prilleltensky’s (1994) *The Morals and Politics of Psychology*, in which he highlighted psychology’s “pervasive dichotomy between the individual and society” and its consequences:

An immediate ideological benefit is derived from such a dichotomy – namely, the individual is studied as an asocial and ahistorical being whose life vicissitudes are artificially disconnected from the wider sociopolitical context. Following this ideological reasoning, solutions for human predicaments are to be found almost exclusively with the self, leaving the social order conveniently unaffected. (Prilleltensky, 1994, p. 34)

Epistemology-based psychologies

To the extent that the above approaches offer critiques of psychology's methodology, they do so in the service of their identity or ideology critique. In contrast, epistemology-based critiques posit alternative methodologies for how to study, understand and support human life. In doing so, they explicitly critique how psychology is done. In its efforts to emulate the natural and physical sciences, psychology adopted and adapted the scientific mindset of the early 20th century and devised ways to relate to human beings as if we were no different in kind from the fish in the sea and stars in the sky. Since human beings have access to our subjectivity, are self-reflecting and self-reflexive, use language, make meaning and sense of our world, so the critical arguments go, a psychology whose knowledge-seeking excludes both the study of these characteristics and the incorporation of these characteristics into its methodology is not a psychology at all.

There are many alternative methodologies inherently critical of mainstream psychology's epistemology. Phenomenological and hermeneutic psychology study human experience interpretively, and are best known through the works of Merleau-Ponty (1962), Gadamer (1976), Ricoeur (1996), and Levinas (1998). Social constructionists focus on language as the meaning-making tool through which human beings construct knowledge and understanding, seeing meaning-making itself as a relational or social process that occurs between people, rather than within or by an individual – see Lock and Strong (2010) for the historical roots of social constructionism. Socio-cultural and cultural-historical psychologies draw their inspiration from Soviet activity theory and the writings of Vygotsky (1978, 1987, 1993, 1994, 1997) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986). For them, what it means to develop, learn and live is to engage in human activity so as to become a member of a culture. Human life is understood as a social-cultural-historical phenomenon, with language playing a key role in how human beings come to understand and act upon the world (John-Steiner, 1985; Cole, 1996; Kozulin, 1999; Newman & Holzman, 2003, 2014; Bruner, 2004).

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE: WITTGENSTEIN

Moving to the practical–critical, as my approach does, brings philosophers into prominence. For decades, philosophers in the philosophy of science, language and mind traditions have provided the most rigorous and scathing critiques of psychology. Among them, Wittgenstein has had the greatest influence on current trends in psychology, particularly those with a postmodern sensibility. For this reason, and because his work has played a central role in the development of an ontology-based, practical–critical psychology (the practice of method), here are some highlights of Wittgenstein's challenges to psychology.

While much of Wittgenstein's writings concern language and our understandings and misunderstandings of what it is, and how it is and is not “connected” to our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and physiological sensations – all topics within the purview of psychology – his overall enterprise casts a wider net relative to the nature of psychological phenomena and practices (Wittgenstein, 1953, 1965, 1980, 1988). He believed that the discipline of psychology obscures the distinction between conceptual issues and empirical methods and, consequently, rushes to experimentation amidst significant conceptual confusion.

One confusion Wittgenstein pointed to is that since conceptual questions serve as the presuppositions of scientific investigation or experimentation, they themselves cannot be scientifically investigated or subject to experimentation. According to two authors who discuss this issue extensively:

Wittgenstein (1980) claimed that psychologists investigate and make sense of their findings by recourse to everyday concepts like knowing, thinking, remembering, intending, believing, and so on. He insisted upon this because one cannot measure, experimentally or otherwise, a given psychological attribute without prior agreement on what constitutes the object of such an investigation. (Racine & Müller, 2008, p. 112)

Even operational definitions suffer this fate, for they are “intrinsically parasitic, for example, on an everyday notion ... that is presupposed by operational definition” (ibid., p. 112).

Another instance of psychology’s conceptual confusion is its essentialist and representationalist conception of concepts. There is not one single manifestation of pain, remembering, thinking, or any psychological concept. Yet psychologists persist in the belief that in their research they are investigating a single, usually underlying and essential psychological process. What human beings do, Wittgenstein insisted, is grounded in social practices. He urged us to “look” (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 66).

A third conceptual confusion characteristic of psychology is its insistence on causal explanation and a systematic correspondence between things and, further, that such connection is universal and omnipresent. Wittgenstein questioned no less than whether the very foundations of science, causality and systemization are applicable to psychology.

Wittgenstein’s effort was to do something about how language, especially language about psychological phenomena and language used by philosophers and psychologists, obscures ordinary life. Among his examples are notions of how children learn to speak, what it means to know something, what feelings such as love, anger and fear are, and how our experiences are “connected to” reality. In great detail and a myriad of ways he showed 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, para. 23).

PRACTICING METHOD: ONTOLOGY-BASED, PRACTICAL–CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Wittgenstein’s critique of psychology has greatly influenced the development of social therapeutics as a practical–critical psychology and social therapy as a practical–critical psychotherapy. Social therapy originated in the 1970s with American philosopher and social activist Fred Newman (1935–2011); over the decades the methodology expanded to other arenas including education and organizational and community development. The broader term, social therapeutics, refers to the methodological approach in all settings. While the remainder of this discussion focuses on therapy, much of it is applicable to the broader contexts and, thus, to psychology.

Social therapy is practical–critical in Marx’s sense of “revolutionary, practical–critical activity” (Marx, 1888/1973, p. 121). For Marx, the transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings is one and the same task. It is revolutionary, practical–critical activity – the social, communal and reconstructive activity of human beings exercising their power to transform the current state of things – that makes individual and species development possible (Newman & Holzman, 1993/2014, 2003; Holzman, 2009; Holzman & Newman, 2012). While Marx was not a psychologist, nor did he directly concern himself very much with psychological issues, his philosophy, sociology and especially his method comprise a critical psychology of their own. He rejected the dualisms of the mental and the physical and the individual and the social upon which psychology is based, for example, “*as society itself produces man as man, so it is produced by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their origin; they are social activity and social mind*” (Marx, 1888/1967, p. 129).

Neither was Newman a psychologist. His studies of the philosophy of science and language, especially Wittgenstein, and the foundations of mathematics, and, later, of Marxian dialectics, were the bases for his rejection of psychology’s and psychotherapy’s premises and major conceptions: explanation, interpretation, the notion of an inner self into which therapists and clients needed to delve, and other dualistic and otherwise problematic conceptions. To Newman’s understanding, in creating and glorifying the isolated individual, psychology adopted the philosophical belief that particulars are what is “real” and that totalities are an abstraction. The notion that emotions are the mental states of isolated individuals is a version of this misconception of the stuff of the world – one that Newman believed was a major source of people’s emotional pain (Newman & Holzman, 1996/2006; Holzman & Mendez, 2003). Therefore, in Newman’s practice and theory, helping people therapeutically means challenging them to relate to emotions as other than private mental states and to themselves as other than “particulars”.

The early Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, associated with cultural historical and socio-cultural psychology, was another major influencer on the development of social therapy and practical–critical psychology. Nearly a century ago, Vygotsky raised fundamental questions of what science is and what psychology could be as practical concerns; he and his colleagues were a part of a great real-life experiment in creating the hoped-for new Soviet society (see Friedman, 1990; Newman & Holzman, 1993/2014; Bruner, 2004; Stetsenko, 2004).

For Vygotsky, psychology as a human science could not develop so long as it was based in objective–subjective dualism (Vygotsky, 1997). A psychology with a natural science method contains “an insoluble methodological contradiction. It is a natural science about unnatural things” and produces “a system of knowledge which is contrary to them” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 298). A scientific study of human beings requires a nondualistic method, a precondition of which is a nondualistic *conception of method*:

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)

This proposal of Vygotsky’s breaks with the accepted scientific paradigm that psychology adopted, in which method is a tool that is applied and yields results. When method is applied,

the relation between tool and result is linear, instrumental and dualistic, or what Newman and I (Newman and Holzman, 1993/2014) referred to as a *tool for result methodology*. Vygotsky proposed a qualitatively different conception of method: not a tool to be applied, but an activity, a “search”, that generates both tool and result at the same time and as a continuous process. Tool and result are not dualistically separated, nor are they identical, nor one thing. Rather, they are elements of a dialectical unity/totality/whole. Method to be practiced, not applied, is what Vygotsky was advocating. The term *tool-and-result methodology* (Newman & Holzman, 1993/2014) is meant to capture the dialectical relationship of this new conception: neither objective nor subjective, it is outside that dualistic box – that is, its strength and potential power as practical–critical psychology.

Social therapy is the practice of tool-and-result methodology. It is primarily done in groups because, compared to individual (one-on-one) therapy, group therapy has a greater potential to challenge particularism and individualism. 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. 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; in this way, they are invited to become practical–critical psychologists. This emphasis on *group activity* is a collective, practical challenge to the assumption that the way people get help therapeutically 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 is, that nothing else is going on in the world except how one is feeling, can be most effectively challenged (Newman & Gergen, 1999; Newman & Holzman, 1999; Holzman & Mendez, 2003; Holzman, Newman, & Strong, 2004).

Continuing its break with mainstream psychology’s foundational dualism and mentalism, the social therapist’s task is to lead the group in the practical–critical activity of discovering a method (à la Vygotsky) of relating to emotional talk relationally rather than individualistically, and as activist rather than as representational or expressionist (Newman & Gergen, 1999; Newman & Holzman, 1999). In this process people come to appreciate what – and that – they can create, and simultaneously to realize the limitations of trying to learn, grow and create individually. If and as the group gradually comes to understand this, members, at different moments, realize that *growth comes from participating in the process of building the groups in which one functions*: the group grows itself.

Consistent with the conceptions of mainstream psychology, the focus of traditional therapy is the individuated self who discovers deeper insights into his or her consciousness. In social therapy this is transformed through the group’s activity into the collective engaged in the continuous activity of creating a new social unit – *the emotionally growing group*. The typical traditional therapeutic question, “How are you [each individual] feeling?” transforms to “How well is the group performing its activity?” Shifting one’s focus from the individual to the group in social therapy does not deny the individual. What it does is reshape and reorganize what is traditionally related to as a dualistic and antagonistic relationship into a dialectical one. On the one hand, mainstream psychology has tended to negate and disparage the group or reduce the group to the individual. On the other hand, dogmatic Marxism has tended to negate and disparage the individual or reduce the individual to the group. Neither one has to be negated or reduced to the other. In recognizing and relating to the groupness

of human life, social therapy does not negate individuals. 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 to the ongoing totality of process-and-product, or tool-and-result (Newman & Holzman, 1993/2014; Holzman et al., 2004; Holzman, 2009).

Finally, as we understand it, a practical–critical psychology, that is, practicing method, involves nonprofessionals who *practice critical psychology in how they live their lives*. These are ordinary people who may have nothing more in common with each other than their resistance to what mainstream psychology has to offer. They are the people who take alternative routes to getting help with their emotional and physical pain, or the education of their children. As a Marxist and a psychologist I believe the relevance and value of a Marxist psychology is as a cultural practice in the world – something masses of people are creating in how they live their lives.

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