

Unscientific psychology - Conversations with Other Voices.

A two day conference on progress and possibilities in creating a cultural, relational and performatory approach to the understanding of human life.

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Arrival. The sun is shining, the temperature around 32 degrees Centigrade. We are out of the city, in the forest. Check in. Room keys. Coffee. Small talk. And then, finally, the welcoming speech.

We are a group of more than 150 individuals from seventeen different nations, mainly psychologists but there are also a handful of anthropologists, sociologists and nurses among us. We have travelled a long way to hear post-modern, and, what gradually becomes clear to me, critical- Marxist psychologists. The group has a common feeling of scepticism for mainstream psychology, but we have our individual way of interpreting our chaotic reality within our own terms of reference.

There were, among us, social constructionists, post-modernists, anarchists, Marxists, a couple of family therapists/consultants, even someone who had studied under the legendary Leontjev and still others who had their base in narrative therapy methods. Some perspectives/groupings sounded rather optimistic, others more cautious or sceptical, some almost rabiat, still others who still had both feet solidly planted in the scientific world. There were many different voices, all were heard and all listened.

I had come with great expectations. During the months up to the conference, I had surfed on the Internet and learned a good deal about East Side Institute's many activities. I will already reveal that, for me this conference was like a revelation - a hope for psychology in this period of disillusion. It was truly inspiring to experience that out there, there is a group, and perhaps, soon, even a large group who is willing and perhaps even anxious to examine our subject with (self)critical eyes. The message from New York was the same for us all, even though there may have been differences in the mode of expression.

Remodel, redefine, de- or reconstruct PSYCHOLOGY

Dr Lois Holzman welcomed us on the behalf of the East Side Institute for Short Term Therapy, New York City, (see box 1). She described the institute's multitude of projects, its tens of thousands of volunteers who take part in "development" projects throughout the whole of the United States. She also told us that here Vygotsky is read as a pre-post-modernist who encourages action and new thinking. Finally, she put the following question that many have perhaps posed themselves:

Why do we talk about unscientific psychology? Is it our intention to undermine ordinary psychology? Yes, but what we want to do is to create an atmosphere in which discussion, growth and development or, as we call it performance are possible. .... Is this provoking? Perhaps, but our books sell, our courses are popular.... Are we Marxists? Maybe, but we had practised our social, performative therapy for many years before we

discovered Vygotsky, Wittgenstein or even Marx. But it is true, we attempt to redefine the world we wish to minimalise alienation.

She pointed out that the most important thing was not whether we call "our" movement post-modern or not, but more that we recognise that we live in a period where we are moving from what some call modern to what some call post-modern, and that this change will without doubt necessitate a deconstruction of our subject. An example of this kind of "revolutionary" deconstruction is exactly what is being practised in New York. Dr. Holzman finished up by emphasising her long period of co-operation with Fred Newman (philosopher, therapist and theatre director). It was, in fact, this co-operation that has ensured that this movement is one of the few, if not the only one that has survived since the end of the sixties. Conversations over lunch with both therapists and former clients strengthened this impression - that here things are done in the way many have always talked about doing them: here is the connection between theory and practice, Marxism lives again here in New York City - "we build community" as those in and around the movement like to say.

After Lois Holzman, it was Ian Parker, whom some may recognise as an activist from the radical psychology network, who overtook the podium. Parker started cautiously, and pointed out some of the dangers that can lie in a post-modern psychology. It was his meaning that it was appropriate to be critical of our own euphoria about the "post-modern movement." The reason for this, according to Parker, is:

That post-modern ideas have been taken up by people that are not as politically aware as is necessary.

By this, he means that post-modernism can lead either to liberal, new conservative and conventional "yuppie tendencies" or anarchistic, social-constructive communities. It is the latter that Parker wishes to see, combined with a large portion critical (Marxist) sense. He warns us, not because we should stop the struggle but, on the contrary, so we can be more aware warriors in the fight for the new age. Wise words from a person, who is not afraid to stand in breach himself in the fight for rights for the disadvantaged. (see box 1: Psychological Politics Resistance.)

The next speaker Kenneth Gergen told us that he was convinced that these post-modernists and/or social constructionalist efforts were on the right track.

They are alive and they do that, which many have talked about.

He offered a closer explanation of what constructionism can give us: an insight in

the fact that all we do, admire, are glad for and fear grows out of relationships.

He enlarged on this with an example - that of language.

It is a mistake to see language as the bearer of truth., language is simply the medium with which we can in a relationship arrive at a common

understanding. Language is not only the spoken or the written word; it is as a handshake, a look, a gesture. Language is a part of our social activity.

Furthermore it is central not only for social constructionists, but also for systemic therapists/consultants/teachers that intervention, e.g. the required teaching materials, should not be considered as a limitation, but rather as a challenge, an invitation to a common investigation of different perspectives and roles, one can take to a defined problem. Gergen continued by pointing out it was not the individual that was the object for psychology, but rather relationships. According to Gergen should individual psychology be replaced by social psychology or at least it should be understood that psychology for the individual must be practised in a dialogue, with others, here and now, in an construction of our common reality that is understood by all those implicated. Traditional psychology has never dealt with the individual, always with a conform, generalised concept which the individual case could be compared with. The "self", the individual is not missing for Gergen and his associates, on the contrary, here the individual has a real chance to be considered, to reveal facets of himself that have previously been partially hidden (repressed, forbidden, abnormal), both for himself and for others. In the post-modern therapy/consultation, there is no-one who dictates how the ideal, generalised other looks, behaves and so on. It was all in all a optimistic paper that closed with the following words:

It is not sufficient that we write articles and books, we must do something for people.

After Kenneth it was the turn of Mary Gergen. She started her paper with the following words.

We must create a "performatory psychology".

Then, astonishingly, yes almost shockingly, she placed a bottle of whisky on the table, took her dress off, showed us her fine silk stockings, her ring that perhaps should have sparkled ... and said : some love chocolate, I love the stage.

Thereupon followed a performance in verse, whose aim was to discuss how women around fifty must either live with society's humiliating and repressive language and customs or protest and demand the right to define themselves in their interaction with others. She emphasised how important it was that psychologists were aware of the negative effects of labelling people with certain qualities or putting them in categories. This was a refreshing contribution to the debate which in the time remaining before lunch resulted in a discussion on electric shock treatment, a form of treatment that is still used many places around the world.

Do we have the desire to enter a dialogue with people who employ such horrific tools?

We took this disturbing and provoking question with us into lunch. An otherwise delightful meal in a charming out-of -doors setting - sunshine, a small pool in which two children splashed. Afterwards back to a further four papers.

John Morss from New Zealand started He showed us a drawing he had made with his son in a hotel room the previous evening. On the drawing the words analysis and criticism were written

How do we cope with these antiquated forms for the understanding of psychological conditions ? What does it mean to be unscientific? ... . We cannot ask the others (tradition scientists). We must try to formulate our own answers.

He offered the following alternatives that he would like to discuss as another possibility, an alternative to analytical or critical starting points

Instead of analysis or criticism: dialogue, discussion, deconstruction  
Instead of interpreting reality or trying to change it, why not try to live in it?

Instead of being "detached or committed" why not try being involved?

The point was that the feud between the strictly scientific or critical schools within our field is a thing of the past. From now on we should, according to Morss, be prepared to discuss values in a co-operation with others wherever we come to operate. Neither was he afraid of mentioning the political consequences of the changes he foresees, namely anarchism. This was a fine start for the afternoons papers.

The next speaker Lenora Fulani from East Side Institute described in detail the many activities that Newman and Holzman had started.

We do not follow methods, we develop a non- epistemologic method. We develop not-knowing activity. And we say: you must try to play a different role than those you play now. There are thousands of us that work voluntarily for the movement. 20,000 people support us with their contributions.

All this was interesting, but I must admit that now and again I could hear my internal sceptical voice. It had problems coping with so much praise for one subject. It was also a little difficult imagining what, actually, all these many reformatory activities were in reality. I have since read some of Holzman and Newman's more recent publications and this make things somewhat easier to understand, what Fulani was trying to convey to us. What she was trying to tell those of us that came from far away, was that East Side Institute works with politically aware (see: [www. Fulani.org.](http://www.Fulani.org)), performatory social therapy in many different contexts.

John Shotter started by stressing that we should not change our theories but rather our practice.

I am not ashamed of being an academic! But at the same time we theorists must be aware that we live in a chaotic world.

There now followed an explanatory paper on the nature of dialogue:

You do what you do in relation to others ... You cannot do anything without its being related other matters ...If we academics are going to

change things then we have to do something new ... not just draw diagrams.

Like Holzman and Newman he drew attention to Vygotsky and Wittenstein and theirs point that language is a tool that is plastic, malleable, a part of the social process, that does not represent or limit a given version of reality.

The final speaker that afternoon was Erica Burman, a feminist and activist from England. She started by expressing strong opinions about traditional psychology which she felt was far to eager to stick discriminating labels on people.

She pointed out that classifications such as race, sex, neighbourhood and class contribute to preconceptions in a research and/or therapy situation. Moreover it was non-constructive to use concepts like qualitative research and revolutionary psychology in the same sentence.

We should not judge research as to whether it is qualitative or quantitative, we should rather look at the aims of the research. Unscientific psychology uses only those methods that have been chosen by those taking part in the research, both the researchers and those who are the objects.

Her ideas are similar to other post-modern and systemic schools (T. Andersen, 1996), that include clients as fellow-researchers, both from an ethical/political as well as a research point of view. She described traditional psychology as re-enforcing norms. And this norms are seldom discussed with the objects of the research, but much more often forced upon them.

Full of impressions from the days discussions, I made my way into the dining-room and the delicious evening meal. Once again there were lively discussions around the coffee tables.

After coffee, it was time for the final session of the day. Fred Newman would describe and demonstrate one of the type of social therapy, Performance of a Lifetime, that is often employed at EAST SIDE INSTITUTE. Newman sat on the podium. Two woman and a man (actors) sat behind him. Seven empty chairs were also placed on the podium.

Those who take part in a session like this are no longer the same when they are through. This evening we will try to press four weeks work into two hours... .. We will have to leave out the warm up and the breathing exercises... But first we need seven volunteers from the audience, he said, addressing the audience. I had travelled all the long way from Denmark, so I eagerly volunteered to be one of the seven. The "performance" activity took the following course.

- 1) Each of the seven participants showed, in a 90 second improvisation, theirs life and who they were.
- 2) All seven improvised together as parents and children (in 3 groups) and a headmistress in an admission interview.
- 3) The three professionals parodied the seven volunteers.
- 4) The seven volunteers had to invent a story in which they had to introduce themselves (with a little help from the instructor)

5) The seven had to perform their story in three acts (theme: scenes from the afternoon's lectures.)

In this context, performance means to come out of the cupboard, to become a part of the world... together with others. The aim is of this type of therapeutic approach is to create a creative environment for development, where the individual, as a member of the group can try out new ways of living. The evening's performance was an interesting and suitably different way of illustrating a practice. The evening was rounded off by a small, quiet social get-together.

The next morning Conversations were held in three groups, identity, political consequences and research/therapy and morals. This was okay but the discussions were not as lively and spontaneous as those of the previous day. This was evident from the follow-up session in plenum. Were we already mentally on our way home or were we simply too full of, as yet undigested impressions?

We said goodbye. Exchanged hugs, handshakes and cards. Some met again the same evening with Holzman and Newman for a final beer, discussion and to make appointments for future meetings. I stayed at the same hotel as Erica Burman and Ian Parker. From them I heard more about what is happening in England, in the circle around these two "fighters". It was exciting to hear about Psychological politics Resistance an organisation that protests against electric shock treatment, stereotyped diagnoses and too much of the wrong type of medicine. Ian Parker talked about Hearing Voices , a group in England who fight for the right to maintain contact with their own inner voice without necessarily being diagnosed as schizophrenic. At last, I thought, here are others who also think that one can talk to those who hear voices, about these voices, without these voices being restrained by drugs.

In addition to all this, a conversation with Hakan Durmaz from Turkey is still fresh in my mind. He had heard of Mammen/Engelsteds The Social Subject (Engelsteds et al. (1993) Aarhus University Press) and gave me a clarifying explanation of two types of activity, the first, that follows the goal of work for bread and thus achieve recognition, the second activity to be a part of life, to continually develop, to perform.

We must create a greater understanding for these forms of activity in which we can truly express ourselves, where we, as individuals and in fellowship with others, can grow and develop.

Beautiful sentiments - and some that he will have the opportunity to elaborate on under his visit to Aarhus in June 1998 at ISCAT 1998 the Fourth Congress of the International society for Cultural research and Activity Theory, Aarhus University, Denmark, June 7 - 11, 1998. (se [www.daimi.psy.au.dk/ISCRAT98](http://www.daimi.psy.au.dk/ISCRAT98), or [www.psy.au.dk](http://www.psy.au.dk)).

I would like to end by expressing my gratitude to EAST SIDE INSTITUTE for a stimulating conference which I hope can be repeated. Some suggestions for a repeat performance: three to four days, more time for discussions between the papers, possibly in smaller groups ... .. and the possibility for several types of performance, paper...

