



Feminism,
Community,
and
Communication

Mary E. Olson
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Editor

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Introduction: A Patchwork Quilt

Mary E. Olson

This collection is a patchwork quilt composed by a group of women who call themselves “The Fortune Cookies.” We have met regularly for ten years and share similar interests in family therapy, gender, and postmodern ideas. My original concept for the work was that it would represent new areas of creativity that members of our group have developed separately, yet together. This broad canopy appealed to the current editor who is interested in new sources of vitality. It also fit well with an interview planned with Janine Roberts, a former editor of the *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, who was one of the first family-therapy trainers in our area.

As the work began to take shape, I saw that there were clear, connecting themes. All of our papers have in common the “social construction of identity” within a “different voice.” Each paper highlights the forms of communication in which a positive sense of identity may be constituted and negotiated. Our papers deal with the issues of gender, race, class, culture and religion, which have provided a needed and important corrective to the earlier blind spots of the family field. But, the spirit of these writings seems to me distinct with a renewed emphasis on collaboration, intersubjectivity, and the process of community. These ideas are relevant wherever people interact--in therapy, community work, teaching and research.

I had another unifying association to this set of papers--the cultural concept of communication. John Carey (1988), a communication scholar in the tradi-

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tion of John Dewey, reminds us of the common roots of the words, “communication,” “community,” and “communion.” Carey argues that the dominant transmission view of communication in the social sciences and in American culture is one that fails to connect people, while the ritual or cultural view makes communication a form of participation. Broadly speaking, I think these papers fall into a cultural perspective where problems of communication, which includes social identity, are tied up with problems of community, and vice versa.

Carey (1988) goes on to say that the transmission view defines communication as “[the geographical extension of] messages in space for the control of distance and people” (p. 15). Giving his opinion that the roots of European colonization lie in the idea of the New World as a religious project, Carey says that the mission of the early Christian settlers was to “transmit” the Word to the Americas, especially to the native peoples. Colonization occurred in the name of establishing and enlarging the Kingdom of God. As American culture subsequently became secular, and as technology became linked to the idea of progress, communication continued to be seen as the transmission and retrieval of information, with a residual overtone as a positive good.

By contrast, Carey states that a totally different theory of communication originates from the world of speech. This alternate view focuses on a different order of experience where the communicative universe is understood not as the transmission of messages but as membership in a social network. The metaphors of ritual, ceremony, dance, and performance provide more appropriate analogs for human experience, because they connect communication to the shared process of making and remaking social worlds.

Carey (1988) goes on to make the point that the cultural view of communication in America derives historically from the town hall meetings and religious ceremonies that bring people together in common purpose. These aspects of sacred and civic life influenced the nineteenth-century philosophical worldview that came to be known as American pragmatism. The major scholars within this tradition of social thought include John Dewey, who drew his metaphors for communication from speech, and the thinkers whom he influenced, who range from George Herbert Mead to Erving Goffman. Contemporary sponsors of this view are the social constructionists—Thomas Kuhn, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Clifford Geertz, Kenneth Gergen, John Shotter, Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen. Although coming from a different transatlantic tradition, postmodern European voices such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault articulate a conception of communication akin to that of the American pragmatists. They all agree that language and communication constitute symbolic activities whereby social reality is produced, maintained, stabilized, and transformed.

Under the overlapping influences of postmodernism and social construction theory, all the contributors to this work show how, within different contexts, communication works as a world-making and identity-making activity. Lynn Hoffman's paper on a "communal perspective" describes how therapists undertake to "rebuild local worlds" mainly by acts of listening and understanding rather than stating and knowing. She writes about the work of other women in the field—Virginia Satir, Harlene Anderson, and Peggy Penn—although this perspective is not limited to women. Tom Andersen's reflecting team, Michael White's community of concern, Chris Kinman's collaborative action plan, and Marcelo Pakman's critical social practice are ideas that are also woven into this view that Lynn says "defies borders."

Ann Hartman's prescient essay on social work—as timely today as when it was first published in 1992—also calls attention to the ethic of listening. Ann sees this stance as the cornerstone of "the collaborative search for meaning" between the practitioner or researcher and the person to be understood. The aim here is understanding, not imposing professional formulations and thus colonizing the experience of those whom we try to know.

My paper, too, is based on a collaborative research inquiry I did with women who were formerly anorectic. From the position of an "outsider witness," I examine the themes of voice and communication and develop relational research practices that allow a person to experience herself as a living, vocal self. In another project, one that incorporates recent research on women and girls, Ellen Pulleyblank writes about "Sisters Inc.," an effort to build a "hardiness zone" for girls in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts. She describes how she uses mentoring relationships and visual arts to create resilience and connection. This paper illustrates how community building can be placed in the service of an effective relational psychology.

Pat Romney's, "Can You Love them Enough?" emphasizes the power of love and spirituality in her work as an organizational consultant to an agency beset by fierce racial divides. Her thinking provides a sharp contrast to the adversarial contests that so often surround such trainings in agencies stratified by race and class. Norma Akamatsu, facing another divided social field, uses "thick conversation" to open the space for what she calls "multiple social identities in deadlocked either/or conversations." Her paper explores a way to counteract divisive controversies within the professional world.

Joan Laird's paper challenges the conventional notion of culture as transmitted and argues instead for culture as "performed," "improvised," "fluid," and "emergent." "Each performance [of ourselves]" she says, "is a combination of tradition and imagination." Judy Davis does the same by comparing the transforming ceremony of therapy to the public theater of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. For her, both therapy and ritual are performance arts. Imbued with a similar respect for culture, Catherine Kikoski writes about an

ethnographic research project where she interviewed young Lebanese women about their lives and, while listening to their stories, saw evidence of critical cultural change.

These papers represent a way of thinking and doing therapy, research, community work, and organizational consulting that highlights the ethical dimension. Each one assumes that human beings are makers of meaning within a common world, rather than objects to be scrutinized by an expert. Relationship, voice, agency, and community are themes inherent in this work. While such ideas themselves are not new, my sister scholar-therapists have taken them in a new direction.

The process of writing these papers and collecting them in a single work has given our group a new sense of purpose. We have worked hard to bring this patchwork quilt to completion, often filling in stitches for each other. As a first-time editor, I wish to thank all the Cookies for their spirit, interest, and energy. Let me end with a remark by Lynn Hoffman: "A fortune cookie is the only cookie with a text inside."

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A Communal Perspective for Relational Therapies

Lynn Hoffman

SUMMARY. This paper proposes a framework for postmodern therapies which focuses on the communal creation of meaning. The therapist is both a weaver and a thread, singular, yet one of many. Just as family therapists took advantage of a newly seen unit, the family, to enlarge their range of choices, so can postmodern therapists take advantage of the shift to the non-essentialist position of social construction theory. However, even that theory takes a back seat to a heightened interest in practice. Instead of asking, "What are the philosophical underpinnings of our work," we ask, "What is the knit one, purl two of the kind of social weaving preferred by effective therapists of any school?" The nature of these more communal practices is considered within the historical context of the family therapy field. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

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INTRODUCTION

Systemic therapy, as a genre, and constructivism, as its philosophy, has been the bridge that connects the modern, essentialist framework of tradition-

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al family therapy to the postmodern constructionist one. The difference between these positions is neatly summed up in the story of the Three Umpires:

First Umpire: I calls 'em as they are. (essentialism)

Second Umpire: I calls 'em as I sees 'em. (constructivism)

Third Umpire: They ain't nothing till I calls 'em. (constructionism)

Translated for the purposes of therapy, the essentialist looks for the cause of the problem and tries to fix it. The problem exists in the real world "out there." Constructivist therapists disagree. They say we can't know what is out there, even though it may exist, because what we perceive is always filtered through cognitive and sensory screens. That is why Maturana always started a lecture by drawing an observing eye in the upper right hand corner of the blackboard.

The constructionist therapist moves to the social web. Feeling herself to be part of a tapestry woven from elements like language, customs and culture, she is at the same time one of the weavers and one of the threads. Kenneth Gergen (1994), the chief proponent of social construction theory, speaks in the same way of the communal creation of meaning. Having taken up a constructionist position myself, I have been exploring the dimensions of this communal perspective and the practices that fall naturally out of it.

But let me start with where family therapy in the U.S. is now. Managed care, with its demands for accountability, has pushed the field of family therapy up against the wall. Many of us are asking what, if anything, backs up our claims. Research results are not outstanding, in part because many of our approaches don't emphasize outcomes, but also because studies of family therapy results are not compelling (Shadish et al., 1995).

Worse yet, we don't even agree on what kind of issues family therapy should deal with. Starting modestly with schizophrenia, we moved on to parent-child problems, marital woes, developmental traumas, life stage stuckness, gender discrimination, sexual abuse, violence, addiction, poverty, and all the injustices of class, ethnicity and race. At the same time, the competition between the "helping professions" for the right to treat these woes has intensified.

This seemed like a good time to assess the field. Even though I am not in the same place where I started, I didn't want to abandon all the good ideas I learned on the way. So I tried to think of family therapy as a braided Easter bread, or (in the Jewish tradition) a Challah, with strands from early on disappearing and then reappearing in a changed position or on another side. Each new strand suggested an answer to a question that had been brought to the fore by a previous one. However, it was the continuing conversation between the strands that made the entire braid so special.

THE EARLY STRANDS

In a recent article (Hoffman, 1998), I described the influence of psychodynamic ideas on early family therapy, citing psychologist Margaret Singer's (1996) view that the ascendance of psychoanalytic and developmental theories after World War II rested on an etiological framework. Singer and others have called this view the "blame and change game." If you can find someone to blame, you can change. Instead of the finger being pointed at the inner dynamics of the individual, it was pointed at some outside influence or person instead.

Early family therapy developed a blame and change game of its own. Family researchers ascribed the cause of emotional distress to underlying factors like unacknowledged anger or unexpressed grief. These conditions, like festering sores, needed to be exposed to light and air. From early on, the key example was the idea that the symptoms of the child hid the parents' pain. Once the therapist focused on the marital conflict, it was thought that the child's symptoms would disappear. This paralleled the psychoanalytic belief that symptoms were surface manifestations of a deeper wound.

This position was usually benign in individual therapy, because the people who were implicitly most at fault remained outside, but it had a chilling effect on family therapy with the whole family because these guilty ones were present. At first, mothers were to blame. Then therapists zeroed in on the parents, who were seen as "triangling" the child into their own conflicts. The collateral kin group was next focused on, then the other helpers who might be entangled in a case. As time went by, the lens steadily widened, but the blame remained.

The notable exception to this perspective was the Mental Research Institute's Interactional View (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch, 1974). Drawing on Milton Erickson's hypnotherapy (Haley, 1973), the MRI group ignored causes and took a rhetorical approach instead. Being constructivists, they held that reality is constructed, and that it was the therapist's job to shape it differently. Strikingly, the MRI never targeted any treatment unit except the complaint, and never insisted the whole family be called in.

The downside of this approach was its condescending view of the customer. Family therapy was likened to a game of chess. The therapist, who knew the rules of the game, was the master player, while the family members were the pieces on the board. An approach like this would naturally tend to hide the thinking behind its moves. If the customer knew the reason for maneuvers like paradoxical interventions, this could undermine their success. One had an extraordinary sense of a band of therapists conducting guerilla warfare against customers determined to resist them.

A new strand then appeared that blended etiological and rhetorical elements together. For the Milan Systemic team (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978),

the cause of psychosis in children was a double-binding family constellation that Selvini called an “imbroglio.” However, their chief intervention was rhetorical: a “counterparadox” that prescribed the relationship system that supposedly maintained the symptom. True to the group’s research orientation, all interviews were watched by a team behind a screen and videotaped, to be studied later. This team idea fascinated therapists and was widely imitated, but it put a gulf between them and their clients and turned the one-way mirror into a one-way street.

Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin (1987) then broke away to start their own training center. The invention of “circular questioning” (Selvini et al., 1980) gave Milan-style therapists a tool for placing family members in a position to reflect on the machinery they were caught in. Cecchin (1996) moved off in this direction, as did practitioners like Karl Tomm (1987). As a result, the pejorative “systemic hypothesis” began to be replaced by reflexive conversations that did not necessarily imply innocence or guilt.

The Interactional approach of the MRI mutated too. Steve de Shazer and Insoo Berg (1991, 1994), along with colleagues like Ben Furman (1992), Eve Lipchik (1993), and William O’Hanlon (1989), moved from an emphasis on problems to an emphasis on solutions. Berg and de Shazer called this a Solution-Focused approach. Solution-talk, despite being just as rhetorical as the problem-talk of the MRI, looked at possibility rather than pathology and had a vastly more sympathetic feel.

These developments were shifts in a more collaborative direction. However, an even more seismic movement called Postmodernism was threatening the pillars that held them up. Instead of asking, “What is the ‘thing in the bushes?’” (Hoffman, 1981), we asked, “How do our ways of knowing create the thing in the bushes? How do intellectual frameworks like normative science constrain what we can know?” For me, this was a watershed. I had never stepped outside the assumptions of my education on so large a scale before.

THE INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

I think it is correct to call Postmodernism a true paradigm shift. Paradigms are explanatory systems that shape the sensibility of large communities of knowers, in our case the Anglo-European knowers of the Western World. Every once in a while these frameworks wear out, and then all the little sub-fields that dangle from them need to change too. Instead of believing in stationary unities such as the “self,” the “family,” “nature,” we began to question them. As philosopher Richard Rorty (1980) says:

The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror containing various representations—some accu-

rate, some not, and capable of being studied by pure nonempirical methods. Without the notion of mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of presentation would not have suggested itself. (p. 12)

In the course of this revolution, academic, scientific and professional certitudes were placed, as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1976) would say, “under erasure.” Also under erasure were the “Western Canon” that was founded on the “Great Books,” and the “Dead White Men” who wrote them. Critical feminists like Rachel Hare-Mustin (1994) began to prod family therapists about their blindness to gender and race and asked a pointed question: must all our therapy discourses be kept within the “mirrored rooms?”

Particular scorn was heaped on the white males of family therapy. In *The Family Interpreted* (1988), Deborah Luepnitz took issue with the psychiatrists who were family therapy’s pioneers, and questioned the teaching of philosopher kings like Gregory Bateson. Systemic therapists were particularly attacked for blaming women; for leaving out questions of power; and for ignoring issues of social justice (Erickson, 1988). It became clear that the “ecosystems” metaphor made the rights of individuals subservient to the balance of the whole.

But I was struggling with other concerns. In “Beyond Power and Control” (1985), I tried to offer an alternative to the masculinist discourse of family therapy. I wanted to make available what psychologist Carol Gilligan (1984) had called a “different voice.” I did not think that this different voice belonged to women, only that the authoritative stance of the expert should not be the only one. But the prevailing wisdom framed what was then called “difference feminism” in a very negative light. It was the right article at the wrong time.

Thanks to postmodern philosopher Lois Shawver (1998), I recently discovered an ally in French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. In *Just Gaming* (1985), he compares the competitive “game of speculation” of the Western philosophical tradition to the “game without an author,” in which the purpose is to listen and understand. He says this amazing thing:

For us, a language is first and foremost someone talking. But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks as a listener, and not as an author. It is a game without an author, in the same way as the speculative game of the West is a game without a listener, because the only listener tolerated by the speculative philosopher is the disciple. (p. 71)

These passages, which I did not know about when I wrote my article, give it a retrospective credibility. If therapy fits into Lyotard’s category of the