

“Do Ask; Do Tell: Contemporary Questions

For

Psychohistorians and Psychobiographers”

By Irene Javors

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I have been concerned that the disciplines of psychohistory and psychobiography have been entrenched in narratives that place too much emphasis on individual and societal psychopathologies. There has not been adequate discussion or focus on contemporary narratives that are concerned with multiculturalism, diversity, intersectionality – the effects of institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, class bias, ageism, on the individual and collective psyche.

My goal is to raise awareness of these challenges and to pose new questions for psychohistorians and psychobiographers to consider when engaged in their research and projects.

*Backstory:*

For most of my adult life, I have been engaged in activist politics as well as interested in the nature of consciousness. I have pursued these interests through academic study – degrees in history, philosophy and for the past 35 years, clinical practice. A focal point of interest for me is the relationship between the individual psyche and society. Both for the individual and society emotions and thoughts are often muddled, confused and in conflict. Simply put, we barely know what the hell

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we are about nor what we are doing moment-to-moment. We are often triggered by external factors and we react without thinking and then the mess begins.

Early on in my clinical training, I was introduced to the work of the sociologist C. Wright Mills, specifically his, *The Sociological Imagination* (Fortieth Anniversary edition, Oxford University Press, 2000). Mills writes, "the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society (p.6)." This observation opens the door to greater understanding not just about the individual but also about the historical moment in which the individual lives.

Mills challenges us to direct our focus away from the idea of the individual psyche as developing separately from larger societal force and suggests that we develop within an historical context- an environment filled with rules, roles, prejudices/biases, institutions, etc.

Russell Jacoby in his *The Repression of Psychoanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians* (The University of Chicago Press, 1983) introduces us to the early work of the political Freudians, such as Otto Fenichel. Jacoby suggests that the root of the ideas of the political Freudians can be found within Freud's. "Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness (1908, Jacoby p, 38). In this work, Freud comes forward with ideas to reform society's repression of sexuality, especially for women. In 1918, Freud lectured that, "the large masses of people" suffer with neurosis from society's repressions and that, "the poor man has just as much right to help for his mind" (Jacoby, p. 65). Out of this came the establishment of many free clinics.

Otto Fenichel took psychoanalysis into a more politically radical direction. Jacoby maintains that Fenichel was “unambiguously devoted to a political psychoanalysis. According to Jacoby, in 1931, Fenichel’s, *Outline of Clinical Psychoanalysis* (English title) posited that, “ it is ‘false’ and ‘dangerous’ to believe that neurosis originates in the biological situation of the child... .. not the Oedipus complex itself, but specific experiences give rise to neurosis; and these experiences rest on historical bases, for instance, the conduct of parents and teachers.”(Jacoby, p.74). These ideas provide the groundwork for the need for the addition of a sociological perspective in order to get a fuller understanding of an individual. This removes the neurosis from the category of an individual’s medical/diagnostic issue and into an historical context concerned with environmental and social/political challenges on the individual. Jacoby also discusses the work of Wilhelm Reich, especially, during the time he was in Vienna (1924-1930) when he led a seminar (with the approval of Freud) on therapy. In 1933, he published, *Character Analysis*, wherein he outlines his theory of body armoring and social repression. From the 1920’s onward, he attempted to reconcile Marxism with psychoanalysis. Additionally, he and several others left leaning colleagues opened in Vienna the Socialist Society for Sexual Advice and Sexual Research (Jacoby, p. 79).

From these readings, I realize that to more fully comprehend an individual as well as a society, one needs to understand the social reality (realities) as well as the individual’s reality (realities). Out of this realization, I took these ideas into the classroom as well as into the consulting room in order to explore how they might play out in real time. What would be the challenges? What new questions and ideas

might emerge that could be used in the fields of psychohistory and psychobiography.

*In The Classroom:*

I teach graduate classes in multicultural and diversity counseling and sexuality and gender counseling in the Mental Health Counseling program at Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University. Both courses are designed to increase student awareness of the relationship between psyche and culture. We study race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, ethnicity, and the counseling process. We focus on identity development within the context of specific cultures and how individuals navigate their lives balancing their familial cultural backgrounds within American society.

The curriculum for the sexuality and gender counseling course includes the historical backstory of the treatment of LGBTQ individuals by the mental health professions as well as in depth discussions of current research and counseling theories. Of particular importance we discuss LGBTQ identity development within the context of the experience of living in a homophobic society.

The clinical component for both classes is fulfilled by the use of Memoirs wherein the subject of the memoir becomes the designated client for the class. This insures that all the students are working with the same client at the same time.

The challenges that arise in teaching either course involve helping students deal with their own biases/prejudices/countertransference issues with materials and subjects that arise during class discussions.

For example, in the multicultural and diversity class, many students were reluctant to discuss issues involving race because they feared that they would be seen as politically incorrect. This issue also came up when a male student used the term “man-up” in discussing gender and sexuality. Several students became angry and interpreted the term as anti-gay.

This led to a lengthy discussion about political correctness and how this has a repressive function. We then discussed how this repression affects an individual and what resultant defenses might develop as a result.

Out of this discussion, we delved into how institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, religious and class biases effect the development of an individual’s defense system wherein the defense becomes ego-syntonic and part of the personality structure. This led to further discussion regarding the counseling process with a client who has absorbed so much ‘outside’ narrative that they hardly differentiate their individual experience from the external world’s biases and prejudices.

In the sexuality and gender counseling class many of the same issues arose as well. However, a major focus of this course involved the fact that politicians and religious leaders openly display anti-lgbtq bias and prejudice only serves to reinforce and validate long-held stereotypes. Also, the re-occurring threat of a return to ‘conversion therapy’ to ‘straighten’ out glbtq individuals demonstrates the level of intolerances for difference prevalent in certain sectors of our society.

When working with an individual who is dealing with their sexuality or gender, the counselor must be aware of these very real external variables of this individual’s life.

Additionally, unlike any other minority group, the lgbtq individual may not receive support from their family; in fact, they may be exiled from their family.

In this class, there is a lot of discussion about the need for 'safe zones' wherein people can talk about their sexuality, definitions of micro aggressions (a comment or action directed at a minority by a member of a majority group that is often unintentional or unconscious that reinforces a stereotype-defined by Derald Wing Sue, 2010) and intersectionality, "the overlapping or intersecting of social categorizations-class, gender, race, sexuality, etc. as they apply to an individual or group in relation to institutionalized systems of domination and oppression (described by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw , 1989).

Out of an understanding of all these societal components, we then focus on the internalization by the individual and the resultant meaning making that happens.

What defenses emerge? or to use a term coined by Wilhelm Reich, what armoring?

From teaching these courses I have come to a greater understanding of the importance of the interface of the individual's internal reality (realities) and the ongoing social reality (realities). I have brought this awareness into my work as a psychotherapist. I have learned how these variables play out in the consulting room as well as the classroom.

### *In The Consulting Room*

60-year-old gay, Caucasian client describes the following incident in our session. He is walking down a street in Tribeca and coming towards him is a well dressed twenty something African American woman having a relationship with her

smartphone totally unaware of the world around her. She walks within a hairsbreadth of him and he puts out his hand to prevent her from walking into him. She stops and screams at him, “ take your hand off me, white bastard.” She, then, calmly goes back to her phone and walks on.

He comes to session the next day relates the story, in tears and says, “ I marched with Martin Luther King and spent a summer in the South organizing- what did I do? She hates me because I am White. I am so fed up with this political correctness. I’ve had it.”

In this single anecdote, we are challenged to look at a cross section of challenging societal and personal issues: the intersectionality of my client’s identity- white, gay, target of a prior gay-bashing incident where he was nearly killed, rejected by his alcoholic mother because he is gay and the loss of an entire cohort group of friends to AIDS. The African American woman filled with rage as a result of who knows what racial or gender related traumas she has lived through. Both are members of minorities who have suffered from institutionalized hate. Yet they have become stereotypes to each other- he-the powerful White Man- she- the African American Woman using political correctness as a weapon.

My client spent many sessions focusing on his feelings about this incident. Out of this work, he came to realize that his need to be “do good” in the world – fight for the rights of other- came from his deep seated desire that one day all those he fought for would stand up for him. When this young woman attacked him, he felt totally betrayed. After a lot of work, he came to realize that his internalized hatred

of himself for being gay prevented him from joining other gay activists- after a lifetime of hiding behind other causes he embraced his own.

Here we see how intersectionality operates in real time and not as some abstract concept. How social inequality is a multilayered experience consisting of several forms of discrimination happening all at the same time.

*Do Ask: Do Tell: Questions and New Directions*

This essay has been concerned with presenting theoretical and clinical ideas and practices related to how to gain a greater understanding of the inter-relationship between the individual and social realities. In order to do a more comprehensive psychohistory or psychobiography, it is essential to question the material/environmental/cultural conditions of a society as well as question how these factors interact with the individual through the family and then other institutions- government, education, religion, military, financial structures, the arts, the rules and roles of a society.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do these institutions reflect and enforce the 'isms'- racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homoprejudice, religious 'isms', etc.
2. How does this impact the individual?
3. What psychosocial defenses has a society created to armour itself from harm and insure its own safety?
4. What are the society's 'trigger points'?
5. Where are the 'safe zones'?



6. How do we understand 'intersectionality' in societal terms?
7. What is the function of political correctness in a society? Is this another way to enforce conformity and repress thought – however awful- or just unconventional? What are the effects on the individual and society?
8. How do we use the arts- film, poetry, literature, dance, music, visual arts, etc, to better understand the zeitgeist of a historical period?
9. How do we understand the subject of a biography using all of the above?
10. How do we increase awareness of our biases/prejudices and counter-transference as we do our research and writing?

These questions are designed for the purpose of encouraging even more questions as we move forward towards developing ever more encompassing fields of psychohistory and psychobiography. The philosopher Suzanne Langer wrote, “ the intellectual treatment of any datum, any experience, any subject, is determined by the nature of our questions, and only carried out in the answers,”(Philosophy in a New Key, Harvard University Press, 1996, reissued).

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Works Mentioned- Annotated:

Kimberle W. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. The New Press.

Excellent collection of essays that explain intersectionality in clear and understandable language.

Russell Jacoby, *The Repression of Psychoanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians*. The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Very interesting historical essay that delves into the radical nature of the political Freudians.

Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy In A New Key: A Study In The Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Powerful insights- highly recommended.

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Brilliant analysis and very timely.

Wilhelm Reich, *Character Analysis*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980.

Although he is very controversial, this study is spot on.

Derald Wing, Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life; Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Wiley, 2010.

The best textbook on the subject with lots of daily examples.