

Psychotherapy Guidebook

# RADICAL THERAPY

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

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# Radical Therapy

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## DEFINITION

Radical Therapy is not so much a technical approach to therapy as it is an attitude toward the therapeutic process as a whole. The premise of Radical Therapy is that all therapy is laden with social and political value choices. Since the values of the client in the therapeutic process are influenced — often profoundly — by the values and attitudes of the therapist, it is incumbent on the therapist to fully analyze the values he holds rather than to either ignore them or take them for granted.

Radical Therapy understands that the origin of psychic oppression is contained in the nature of institutions that participate in the formation of inner emotional conflict. These institutions include the isolated authoritarian nuclear family, the educational system, the mass media, the religious establishment, the regimented workplace, and the organs of state power. These institutions produce and reproduce class divisions, racism, sexism, self-seeking, alienation, authoritarianism, submissiveness, cynicism, and a host of other value orientations and emotional conditions. Feelings and behaviors of inadequacy, impotence, inferiority, lack of self-worth, anxiety, and so forth

can be traced to the institutions, processes, and ideologies of capitalist society.

Hence, as much as is possible within a genuinely therapeutic context, radical therapists seek to encourage the spirit of rebelliousness rather than to belittle it as “adolescent,” and to encourage the spirit of social idealism rather than to crush it as “grandiosity.”

Radical Therapy views psychology as having society-wide implications. Psychotherapeutic pronouncements exert a profound influence on everyone. They affect the way we raise children, envisage love, marry, educate people, experience sex, view ourselves, and distinguish abnormal behavior from normal. Therapists are the priests and gurus of our time — experts whose words are accepted as truth. So the radical critique of therapy is seen as implying the need for a counterweight to the support that mainstream social work, psychology, and psychiatry have lent to the status quo.

It may easily be seen that there are a great variety of therapeutic techniques and theories that can be made compatible with a Radical Therapy approach. Hence, there are radical psychoanalysts, radical transactional analysts, radical Gestalt therapists, and even radical body therapists.

## HISTORY

Radical Therapy can trace its origins to almost the very beginnings of modern psychotherapy. Almost as soon as the Freudian psychoanalytic movement was launched, Otto Gross, a German anarchist and psychoanalyst, was developing a synthesis of psychoanalysis and radical theory. Alfred Adler, while still a psychoanalyst, made the first attempt to integrate psychoanalysis and Marxism. In the early 1930s Wilhelm Reich headed up the Sexual-Political Association.

There have since been numerous writings that have attempted to integrate psychological insight and a radical political perspective by such people as Frantz Fanon, Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, R. D. Laing, and many others. Significantly, these works have been written by people who have not been sympathetic to the Stalinist bureaucratic regime in the Soviet Union. Soviet psychological writings since the 1920s have been arid, unimaginative, and one-dimensional. Ironically, they often have much in common with American behavioral psychology-

The recent history of Radical Therapy can be dated as beginning in 1970, with the first issue of a journal called *The Radical Therapist*, a product of the previous decade's radical ferment. *The Radical Therapist* is now renamed *State and Mind*. It has been joined by other journals, such as *Issues in Radical Therapy* and *Catalyst: A Socialist Journal of the Social Services*. Radical therapists practice privately, in independent collective groups, and in

established agencies. The Radical Therapy movement has its own internal controversies, but basic cohesion remains around the proposition that the politics of the therapist — whether conservative, liberal, radical, or hybrid — is a potent element of the therapeutic process and the social impact collectively made by psychotherapeutic authority.

## TECHNIQUE

For Radical Therapy, knowledge of the points at which the various psychodynamic psychotherapies influence emotional and behavioral change is key. These points include suggestion, persuasion, emotional support for approved trends, information about alternatives, and approval-disapproval cues. These are necessary parts of the process, but they are anything but value-free. An understanding of the fact that these elementary techniques are laden with social meaning and impact allows the radical therapist to use himself in a conscious way. A clarified analysis of social problems becomes intrinsic to the therapist's knowledge base when it is understood that, in a cumulative way, values concerning competition, personal ambition, sex roles, sexual orientation, class and racial biases, and so forth are a prominent part of therapy.

When the therapist is not aware of what he is doing in the area of values and world view, then the influence will be covert, but it will remain.

Therapies that believe they have a neutral value in a political sense or that the personal is not political can only encourage attitudes that are accepting of the status quo.

## APPLICATIONS

Aside from the differences that might exist between, say, a radical psychoanalyst and a radical Gestalt therapist, there are three main trends discernible within the radical movement as to how to apply the basic insights of Radical Therapy. These may be called aggressive radical therapy, defensive radical therapy, and social radical therapy.

Aggressive radical therapy holds to the notion that people can (and perhaps even ought to) be radicalized through the therapeutic process. When all values are made explicit — sometimes through actual didactic sessions — then the client will see that the solution of emotional conflict and the raising of political consciousness are synonymous. The difficulty with this approach comes first of all with the self-selection of clients who are almost always radical or radicalizing people.

Defensive Radical Therapy views the therapeutic process as a survival enterprise. The attempt is to begin at the client's present state and to use as much encouragement as is possible to aid the client in seeing the social reinforcements of his problems, the lack of uniqueness, and the combative,

assertive attitudes that are necessary to keep oneself from self-defeating behavior. The role of therapy is seen not so much as to create pervasive radical consciousness as the mode of mental well-being — which is, in any case, considered generally impossible in the therapeutic context — but to create sufficient social awareness as one tool in helping people to cope with a nonsupportive, oppressive, authoritarian social order.

Social Radical Therapy tends to give up on the notion of individual, group, or family therapy in favor of seeing society as the patient. Social radical therapists in their purest form tend toward dissolving into the larger radical political movement, except insofar as by their origins as therapists they tend to have a special interest in protesting mental hospital abuses, in helping mental patients to organize politically, in doing community-based organizing, and in incorporating psychological insight into political analysis.

A possible synthesis is to view aggressive Radical Therapy as frequently useful to radical clients, defensive Radical Therapy as often useful to nonradical clients, and social Radical Therapy as a necessary dimension of the radical therapist's view of how to uproot the conditions that cause emotional oppression.