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Munchhausen's Pigtail or Psychotherapy and "Reality"

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points out relevant factors from other disciplines or subdisciplines of sociology, it downgrades contemporary emphasis on feelings. The challenge for future researchers, including practitioners, will therefore be to integrate this important “emotional” area into the sociocognitive approach.

Munchhausen’s Pigtail or Psychotherapy and “Reality,” essays and lectures by Paul Watzlawick. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990. 286 pp., \$19.95 cloth-bound.

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When I was a small child, I used to follow my mother about and respond to everything she said by asking, “Why?” Eventually, her patience would wear thin and she would snap at me with “Vy, vy, vy, Enough already with vy!”

These long-forgotten early memories were evoked upon reading Paul Watzlawick’s book, which also emphatically rejects the “why” question, albeit for different reasons. In *Munchhausen’s Pigtail* the author argues that as clinicians seeking to effect change in human interaction, we have been asking the wrong question. By asking “why,” we sought to identify traumatic events in a person’s past which could provide insights into his or her present behavior. The idea was to assist the client to bring long-buried past incidents to consciousness. In this traditional psychodynamic approach we assumed that the resulting insights represented liberating revelations of “truth,” which could lead to transformations in behavior and in interpersonal relationships.

In reality, the author argues, this process often proved to be long, tedious, and unsuccessful. He suggests a radical departure from this traditional approach, based on a reexamination of its underlying premises. Specifically, he challenges three central tenets of the traditional psychodynamic model. He challenges the assumption of linear cause and effect, suggesting instead a cybernetic model. He challenges the treatment of a single individual when the problem is a troubled relationship. (The improvement of troubled relationships is his central focus in this book.) Finally, he challenges the assumption that treatment necessarily entails a search for truth—an answer to the “why” question.

According to the author, the mission of psychotherapy (and indeed of science in general), is much more pragmatic. Indeed, pragmatism is the essence of his approach to the transformation of relationships. Accordingly, he suggests observation and analysis of the patterns of interaction in a relationship for the purpose of uncovering the underlying constructed realities of the participants. He further suggests examination of these constructed realities—definitions of the situation—for the purpose of determining promising changes in the constructs.

This is a radical departure from traditional psychodynamic approaches because it does not rest on the idea of science as a search for truth. Indeed, the author specifically rejects that idea and argues that it is not important whether a client's perception of reality is true. What is important is that it works!

The author is not dealing here with distortions of what he calls first-order reality. (First-order reality involves objective descriptions of such things as the colors of the flag or of Tom Sawyer painting the fence white.) He is dealing with second-order reality, which involves the attribution of meanings to these objective first-order realities. Attribution of meanings calls for assessing what the flag stands for or whether painting the fence was actually a privilege or a punishment.

Human relationships—in contrast to objects which exist in their own right—do not lend themselves readily to consensus regarding their properties. Interpersonal reality is not real in the same sense that objects are. It is a reality of the second order. A relationship has its reality only in the perceptions of the partners, and even that reality may be only partially shared by them. As Jessie Bernard has noted, there may be significant differences between his marriage and hers.

The role of the therapist, the author suggests, is not only to ascertain the separate constructs of the parties to a relationship, but also to analyze the cybernetic interaction between the component constructs. The therapist's goal is for the clients to adopt a harmonious *combination* of constructs. The therapist should not be concerned with *why* people adopt particular views of reality, but rather with whether those views are causing pain. If they are, the therapist should assist clients to adopt less dysfunctional combinations of constructs. This does not necessarily mean less distorted constructs of reality—only less destructive ones.

This approach suggests a clinical application of the Thomas theorem, which observes that if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. Watzlawick carries that idea a step further, however. He argues that since beliefs can provoke real consequences, then it is possible to decide in advance on the consequences we seek and then choose those beliefs—constructs of reality—definitions of the situation which promise to eventuate in the desired consequences.

The author's provocative ideas raise larger questions beyond the realm of therapy and relationships. On the one hand, there is something attractive about a model which emphatically eschews the embrace of cosmic "truths." Human history is already sufficiently strewn with the corpses of the victims of ideologues carrying the banner of "truth" to infidels, heathens, heretics, and dissidents.

On the other hand, there is something disquieting about planning a deliberate, conscious, disregard for "truth." It raises the idea of giving up the fight

against nothingness, surrendering the quest for meaning. The author recognizes the problem, but does not ultimately come to grips with it.

He draws on Schopenhauer to make the case that sense and order in the world are constructed by an act of human attribution and only then rediscovered "out there" as supposed facts. What we call reality, he argues, is not what we discover but what we create. Once a world picture has been posited, a reality is constructed and the unconscious creators are trapped within that image. Their perceptions are bounded by that framework.

Those who suffer emotionally suffer not just from reality but from their own pictures of reality. Essentially, human sufferers (individuals, couples, families, or even nations) are trapped in their own world pictures, playing a game-without-end. This game has no rules for changing the rules and no rules for ending the game. It creates a vicious cycle without readily discernable escape routes. Nevertheless, Watzlawick argues, escape attempts are imperative:

If the sufferer should ever succeed—be it spontaneously or through therapy—to escape the apparently all-encompassing framework of his reality, it is the result of a remarkable and astounding leap out of his framework, a pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps that rivals the trick of Baron von Munchhausen. I would even go so far as to maintain that the essence of effective therapy lies in the bringing about of this leap. . . . (184)

In the final analysis, the critical ingredients of interpersonal reality are the answers we create to the questions we *choose to pose*. The consequences of our choice of questions are profound. The author persuasively challenges us to abandon the "why" question—the search for truth—and to reconsider our perceptions of interpersonal reality as well as our favorite strategies for therapeutic intervention.

Role Change: A Resocialization Perspective, by Melvyn Fein. New York: Praeger, 1990. 203 pp.

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The field of clinical sociology has stood on the periphery of mental health practice for decades. With the publication of *Role Change: A Resocialization Perspective*, clinical sociology may not only move into the psychotherapy arena, but may in fact change the way more traditional disciplines view the client and the helping process.