FROM ERICKSONIAN ROOTS TO POSTMODERN FUTURES. PART I: FINDING POSTMODERNISM

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As part of a larger project reviewing the 20 years since the first Therapeutic Conversations conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma, we reflect on developments in the postmodern therapies. We discuss the evolution in the interviewees’ respective clinical work and the future of the field. The interviewees describe how they “found” solution-focused and narrative therapy and what it was they each found compelling about these approaches; discuss the postmodern turn that both approaches exemplify; and reflect on the rapprochement and distinctions between the narrative and solution-focused approaches.

In June 1991, the first Therapeutic Conversations conference (TC 1) was held in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was a sparkling moment in the development of postmodern

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collaborative therapies. Therapy was moving away from expert positioning, pronouncements from behind the mirror, and strategic interventions, and toward collaboration, flattening the hierarchy, and “therapy as conversation.” TC 1 brought together eight important leaders in this shift: Steve de Shazer, David Epston, Stephen Gilligan, Bill O’Hanlon, Karl Tomm, John Weakland, Michele Weiner-Davis, and Michael White. The TC 1 gathering was not the “start” of the postmodern approach to therapy; several threads (e.g., Andersen, 1987; Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986; O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989; Penn, 1982, 1985; Tomm, 1987a, 1987b, 1988) were already well underway. However, it was an inflection point—the first gathering of such a group of likeminded thinkers and practitioners. The conference proceedings (Gilligan & Price, 1993) were published soon after.

Twenty years after the conference and the publication of the proceedings, I (JC) thought the time was right to reflect on what had transpired since then. As part of this reflection, in June 2010, Tracy and I interviewed Gene Combs, Yvonne Dolan, Jill Freedman, and Terry Trepper in Evanston, Illinois. It was a privilege to spend the afternoon in conversation with these four innovators, each of whose clinical, teaching, and writing experience stretches back over 25 years. Jill, Gene, and Yvonne have shared roots in the Ericksonian tradition. Jill and Gene’s first book (Combs & Freedman, 1996) describes their Ericksonian approach. Yvonne’s first book (Dolan, 1985) described Ericksonian methods for helping “chronic” patients. She later integrated her Ericksonian approach with solution-focused therapy (SFT; Dolan, 1991). Terry coauthored a pioneering book on family therapy approaches with families in which incest had occurred (Trepper & Barrett, 1989). Jill, Gene, and I presented at TC 1, which Yvonne attended as a participant.

During our interview, we discussed developments in the conversational therapies in the 20 years since TC 1, the evolution in their respective work, and the future of the field. This article covers how they “found” SFT and narrative therapy and what they each found compelling about the approaches they eventually adopted; articulates the postmodern turn that both approaches exemplify; and discusses the rapprochement and important distinctions between the narrative and solution-focused approaches that have developed. The second installment of this interview will describe the evolutions of narrative therapy and SFT, discuss the reaction to postmodern approaches, ask the important question of whether models matter, and speculate about the future of these approaches in view of some of the predominant currents in contemporary psychotherapy.²

¹The rest will appear in a subsequent special section of JST.
²Tracy and I asked the questions, but given the volume of material in this interview, I have omitted most of the questions to highlight the answers given by Jill, Gene, Yvonne, and Terry. While I have organized this account thematically, not chronologically, these are direct quotations. I have followed the standard practice of using ellipses and square brackets to indicate deletions and additions to the text. The interviewees reviewed a draft to ensure that I quoted them in context. I have embedded, in italics, some transitional comments.
BECOMING SOLUTION-FOCUSED

**Terry:** I was trained as a hard-core behaviorist at the University of Oregon. . . . but, through the 80s, like a lot of people, I got influenced heavily by family therapy and systemic thinking . . . then applied it to working with incest families, with Mary Jo [Barrett; Trepper & Barrett, 1989]. . . . Mary Jo showed me [Yvonne’s] book [Dolan, 1991], and I read the first chapter and said, “That’s what I really feel.” I think that is probably why I wanted to see Insoo [Kim Berg].

**Gene:** What . . . was in that book that really caught you? What . . . had [you] been looking for?

**Terry:** It didn’t feel like before, that I was able to say what I really wanted to, which was that incest and abusing families could have hope, and be treated positively, with respect, with love. We needed to couch a lot, to be politically correct at the time. I think [the social context] required [practitioners] to be a little heavy-handed, perhaps punitive. . . . Our approach was the “softest,” because we would work with the whole family, and that there was hope for the family to actually be able to reunite, stay together. . . .

**Gene:** Which included the abusing person?

**Terry:** Which included the abusing person. That was outrageously controversial.

**Yvonne:** One sentence from your book [Trepper & Barrett, 1989, p. xx] was very important for me: “While we teach [incest families] how not to abuse, they teach us that families can be in need, yet strong; can sometimes stumble, yet be resilient, and can be afraid, yet courageous.” That way of thinking makes me very, very comfortable with narrative therapy, and it makes me very comfortable with solution-focused therapy, because I feel like both these approaches, not only recognize that, but try to do something with it in cooperation with the client.

**Jeff:** So, when did you [Yvonne] start [working] with Steve and Insoo . . . ?

**Yvonne:** I think it was ’84. I had read some things, and my then partner, Charlie Johnson, and I decided we wanted to go study with them. . . . And we . . . went and observed the team, and then after about two hours, [Steve] said, “Okay you guys are on the team.” And my anxiety was off the charts. . . . And back then, [the Brief Family Therapy Center, Milwaukee, WI] seemed to be in a Camelot period. . . . With their team, it felt like there were no egos in the room. . . . And after that, [Steve and Insoo] often came to Denver and we had a team. . . . So that’s how I learned.

**Jeff:** When you wrote A Path With a Heart [Dolan, 1985], how connected were you with Steve’s ideas?

**Yvonne:** Not at all, and so I was very, very surprised when Steve said that he thought at the time that it was very consistent with solution-focused therapy, and that it fit very well with his ideas of how you might work with people [who] back then we called chronically mentally ill in a solution-focused way. I don’t think he would’ve said that towards the end of his life, when solution-focused was much, much more developed, but at the time he said that. . . . I was very, very surprised, and pleased.
Jeff: [T]his may be attribution bias. . . . I made a point of reading *A Path With a Heart* again, [looking for connections to SFT].

Yvonne: Oh, my goodness, you didn’t.

Jeff: There’s this great quote at the end: “When feeling ‘stuck’ during a therapy session, the first rule is to change what you’re doing!” Exclamation mark [Dolan, 1985, p. 178].

Terry: She wouldn’t use the exclamation mark now (*laughter*). . . .

Jeff: And, there’s other stuff. . . . There’s a section on presupposition questions, “What will you notice when things are better?,” and ideas about resistance that are [very consistent with SFT].

Gene: To me, all that stuff flows from Palo Alto [Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974]. [I]t’s got a very specific temporal and geographic origin. . . . Apparently, Steve was really influenced by all those ideas.

Jill: It surprised me in reading *More Than Miracles* [de Shazer et al., 2007] that there wasn’t talk about [Milton] Erickson. . . .

Yvonne: I don’t think that [Steve] meant to say it didn’t come from Erickson, but . . . in writing [*More Than Miracles*], he was trying to be very clear about just what [SFT] was. And I don’t think . . . he thought of [SFT as Ericksonian] anymore.

Jill: Yeah, that’s what I meant, so that was interesting to me.

Terry: [As Steve said, as] I got to know him [later in] his life, “I watched a master therapist work for a number of years . . . and was paying a lot of attention to what worked and didn’t,” and he was [referring to] John Weakland—one of his best friends and his mentor. [H]e talks also about when they started to diverge. . . . [but he was] profoundly influenced by Palo Alto.

Yvonne: Well, I noticed that throughout their careers, [Steve and Insoo would] go through sort of a hierarchy. . . . [O]nce we find out . . . what they want to have happen, we find out if that is already happening in some way. If it’s not, we then ask more questions. And if still that doesn’t work . . . we do something different, and almost always do something different . . . was strategic . . . something that could have happened that Palo Alto. I saw that with both of them, over the years.

Jeff: But, that wasn’t, to put it this way, well publicized.

Yvonne: No, and you know, there’s another part that was not well publicized. . . . When Steve and I were working on *More Than Miracles*, we have three [transcripts of sessions], and [Steve] was looking at [the video of one my sessions], and he said, “I had forgotten how hypnotic you are.” The idea of asking the client to decide at her own pace. . . . [Steve thought] that the way it was said [was] almost like a hypnotic invitation.

FROM ERICKSONIAN TO NARRATIVE

Jeff: So, when did you two meet Michael [White]?

Jill: I think it was 1987. What do you think?
Gene: I think that’s right. . . .
Jill: Well actually, I met him before Gene met him. . . . So, I met him by accident. . . . I was talking to Jennifer Andrews. . . . and she said, “You know, there’s this guy from Australia” . . . and they were having him for a day. . . .
Gene: Watching Michael see families.
Jill: Michael saw two live families. I wrote down every word he said, none of which I understood (laughter). I later came to be clear about it—I didn’t understand the implications, but I wrote it down. . . . But I came back, I was so enthusiastic, and this isn’t like me at all. . . . Usually I really spent a lot of time learning something before I do it, but I was so enthusiastic that I said to Gene, “We have to work this way.”
Gene: But what I remember you saying . . . “This is what we’ve been looking for. . . .”
Jill: One thing that was really interesting to me. . . . When we first saw Michael White’s work, we felt like it was very hypnotic.
Gene: But we were, you know. . . . We were coming out of Ericksonian. . . .
Yvonne: Absolutely, you’d written Symbol, Story, and Ceremony [Combs & Freedman, 1990].
Jill: And so we were talking to [Michael].
Gene: So, we were convinced that he was convinced [that he was working hypnotically]. We thought he couldn’t not be thinking about what he was doing as trance induction.
Jill: So we thought he had these embedded suggestions, [but] he was saying, “I know nothing about hypnosis.”
Jeff: David [Epston] knows all that stuff.
Jill: David does and he’s interested in it. And then, we later find out that in Australia, at least at the time, it was illegal for social workers to do hypnosis (laughter).
Jill: So we thought, well, maybe he really is doing it, but he can’t say it yet.
Jeff: We [Chang & Phillips, 1993] wrote [that we thought that some of his questions seemed like a hypnotic confusion induction], but he replied that this “does not strike a chord” [White, 1993, p. 121].
Jill: So [at] this Erickson conference, and we showed this tape of Michael, and we showed a tape of Milton Erickson, and [suggested that what Michael was doing was similar to what Erickson was doing]. I think if he had known that, that would have been the end of our relationship. . . . [At that time], we couldn’t understand . . . that had nothing to do with the way he was thinking.
Gene: As we got to know Michael more, and as I read more widely the stuff he had read . . . he drew these connections out of people’s writing that were very precise. He had that in common with Erickson, I think, that he cared very much about words and about the meaning of words, and [how] any word from a given vocabulary implied [an entire] worldview. . . . a whole philosophy, a whole set of values. . . . So the stuff that was looking Ericksonian to us, I think, wasn’t. When we very first met him it was coming a whole lot from [Gregory] Bateson [White, 1986]. He was just beginning to read . . . postmodernist social
psychology. He was reading Geertz [1973], Edward [Bruner] and Victor Turner [1986]. . . . [W]e were trying to attribute it to Erickson [and] pulling in a whole other theoretical frame that would lead to a misunderstanding of stuff that he was passionately involved in.

**Jill:** I also think that also having not read Erickson . . . he probably thought [Ericksonian therapy] was more directive than he ever [intended], that when we said he was embedding [suggestions], we were saying that he was being directive, and he was not . . .

**Gene:** Or sneaky.

**Jill:** . . . or sneaky, and he very much didn’t want to be directive. And so, it really didn’t fit for him. But, it was funny, because we would think about suggestion as being a lot more complex than I think he did, having not studied it.

**Jeff:** As opening options, and permissive . . .

**Jill:** Yeah.

**Yvonne:** It sounds like . . . you felt that Michael had a real awareness of the power of associations, things that are implied, and then the associations that go with that.

**Gene:** I’m not sure [that “association” is the right word]. When he was trying to understand the thinking of a particular scholar, he really tried to understand how that all worked together as a system, as an overall view, as a discourse. And he thought it really mattered, in terms of perception, . . . in terms of experience, he would’ve said. It changes your moment-to-moment experience, which words you’re using, which concepts [are] organizing your next actions. He was very particular about that. I learned a lot about thinking precisely. . . .

**Yvonne:** Almost like language games, you know in a Wittgensteinian [Wittgenstein, 1953] sense. Steve maybe was a bit parallel with that, in terms of thinking about language games and what’s implied in how we phrase a question, what question we ask, and maybe even what question we refrain from asking.

**COMING HOME . . . OR SOMEWHERE BETTER**

**Gene:** So. . . . Jill came back from this one thing with Michael and she said, “This is what we’ve been looking for. This is it.”

**Jeff:** “What we’ve been looking for.” Is what you said?

**Jill:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I taught Gene everything I knew. We did one therapy session with the family. The family came back, and I said I don’t know what you do for a second session (laughter).

**Yvonne:** What did you do?

**Jill:** We went back to what we were doing before, and then . . .

**Gene:** So this kind of mishmash of strategic [Fisch et al., 1982] and Milan [Palazzoli, Cecchin, Prata, & Boscolo, 1979].

**Jill:** Four months later, that’s when Gene met Michael. . . . I told him [about our
one session]. And he was very patient. He said, “Okay, so tell me what they said. Okay, you can do this, and this, and this. . . .” But really, we had no idea what to do in a second session.

**Terry:** That experience, that phrase you said, “This is what I’ve been looking for.” *(Turning to Yvonne)* Did you have that with solution focused? ‘Cause I did, I did. When I read your book, and then immediately rushed to see Insoo. . . . I said the same thing: “This is it. This is what fits. This is what I’ve been trying to articulate.”

**Gene:** And I don’t know if this is fits for you or not, Terry, but the *it* in *This is it*, for me, and I think for Jill too, didn’t have a lot to do with techniques, didn’t have a lot to do with particular kinds of questions. It had to do with the kind of relationship that was there in the room, with what was going on between Michael and the people he was working with. . . . [It was respectful, connected, and purposeful, different from] the distance that we had been worried about with the Milan stuff. There was a heart; I mean, seeing you [Yvonne] sitting there, I’ll say a heart *(laughter)*. That was the *it* in that. That was what made it really attractive.

**Jill:** That’s what made it *it*.

**Gene:** That’s what made me want to learn how to do it, and the stuff that goes with it, and how do you embody that?

**Yvonne:** Did it feel like you were coming home?

**Terry:** Yeah, for me it did.

**Gene:** Home is a weird concept *(laughter)*. It felt like I was on a *path with heart* *(laughter)*. It felt like I was moving toward something that was better than any home I had ever known.

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**FROM PRESCRIPTION, TO INDIRECT SUGGESTION, TO THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATION**

**Gene:** We [Jill and Gene] met knowing how to be Ericksonian individual therapists. And I got interested in Ericksonian because I’d been trained as a physician . . . in all this very expert hierarchal, knowing, prescriptive way of working, and I didn’t like it. . . . So when I stumbled on Erickson from reading Jay Haley [1973], it was like scales fell from my eyes, and there was this way of doing indirect permissive suggestion. But then, after Jill and I met, we both got interested . . . through reading the Palo Alto stuff . . . in family therapy.

**Jill:** Actually, I think that Charlie [Johnson] had a lot to do with our getting interested in family therapy. He kept talking about “Ericksonian family therapy. . . .”

**Gene:** Well, also, there was other stuff. I had been reading Bateson, and it changed my cosmology. It literally did. I read *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* [Bateson, 1972] cover to cover. So, I really was trying to teach myself how to think connectedly, like everything is connected to everything else. . . . So, as a couple we met at a time where we knew Ericksonian stuff pretty well.
Yvonne: Well, and you wrote a book [Combs & Freedman, 1990].
Gene: . . . and we felt like we had that down. . . . But we weren’t so good at family therapy. So, we had gone to study with the Milan people [Cecchin, 1987, 1992; Palazzoli et al., 1979].
Jill: But the way that happened was you were one of the editors for one of those huge Ericksonian conference books, and the paper that you got to edit was about how the Milan team, you could look at what they were doing . . .
Gene: As indirect suggestion.
Jill: . . . circular questioning as indirect suggestion [e.g., Ferrier, 1986; Matthews, 1984]. And so that link, between indirect suggestion, and the Milan team, family therapy, and Erickson, that’s why we went to Milan.
Gene: So, we went and we started studying Milan therapy, and we worked hard to understand it, and thought we did pretty well. But we were the worst therapists (laughter), I think. . . .
Yvonne: No, that’s not possible.
Jill: No, I think it’s cultural.
Gene: I think a lot of people that tried to transplant Milan to [North America] ended up saying that there’s too big a cultural difference. . . . It doesn’t fit, it doesn’t work in America somehow. . . . We felt removed from people.
Jill: But you know, in Italy . . . if you say you live alone, they say (in a solicitous voice), “What’s wrong?” (laughter). . . .
Gene: If they see you sitting by yourself on the beach, they’ll come down and sit beside you, just because it doesn’t feel right to have someone sitting by themselves on the beach.
Jill: So I think a lot of Milan stuff was helping people separate a little.
Gene: Get a little distance (laughter).
Jill: But that wasn’t really what we needed in America, I don’t think.

I commented about how Symbol, Story, and Ceremony (Combs & Freedman, 1990) had been so useful to me, and asked Jill and Gene to situate the book in their evolution, and what was going on in the field at that time.

Gene: It kind of fell off the map somehow. There was a lot of interest in it in family therapy circles, at the time . . . and I think it has to do with family therapy in general wanting to be less prescriptive, and the way the ceremony stuff was being done was in assigned ceremonies, like assigned homework. [A]s a field, [we wanted] to be less prescriptive. I know, that’s why I stopped doing it so much, was it felt like me telling people what to do too much.
Jeff: ’Cause I think about that book that [intrigued some colleagues and me], Fishing for Barracuda [Bergman, 1985]. [Prescriptive strategic paradoxical interventions and rituals]—that was the way people were thinking then. . . . But to [those of us] who were laboring along in agencies, [Gene and Jill] released this book that’s Ericksonian [Combs & Freedman, 1990] [and] . . . the next year, in Tulsa, [presented] on narrative questions . . . And that . . . looked abrupt to people who didn’t understand the context and your evolution.
Gene: But, as Jill was talking about a little earlier, we didn’t fully understand what we were doing at the time. At Tulsa . . . we were still thinking of it as indirect suggestions. . . . that we were reading into narrative questions. And you know, there was all that stuff about questions in the air at the time.


Gene: Which were incredibly influential.

Jill: Wow. Those were amazing.

Jeff: Eve and Steve’s purposeful interview paper [Lipchik & de Shazer, 1986], and [others (Fleuridas, Nelson, & Rosenthal, 1986; Penn, 1982, 1985)].

Gene: . . . and the stuff about circular questioning from Milan [Cecchin, 1987, 1992; Palazolli et al., 1979], and just this whole notion about questions as interventions, rather than as information gathering. [That] was a huge shift for everybody. . . . [We couldn’t] help thinking about the presupposition in questions. . . . I think . . . that to Michael, thinking of it as hypnosis or as suggestion was sneakier than he wanted to be, it was more intentional in a [direction preferred by the therapist].

Yvonne: Well, it kind of implies that the therapist knows something the client doesn’t . . . as opposed to co-construction, [where] they know different things, but don’t favor one position over the other. Is that right?

Gene: Yeah, yeah. And it’s sort of like, it’s leading from in front rather than “leading from one step behind” [Cantwell & Holmes, 1994].

Jill: Which is interesting, that phrase was in your book [Pichot & Dolan, 2003] a lot, and it’s also in Michael and David’s writing.

Gene: For me at least, the Houston Galveston folks [Anderson & Goolishian, 1992] were also there in that whole stew that was going on there in the early/ mid 80s, and were very influential on me. Just in that whole general attitude of not knowing . . . perhaps being the most radical in terms of simplicity of theory, or refusing to theorize very much.

Jeff: And not being instrumental.

Gene: This real anti-instrumental stance, that was incredibly influential.

Terry: Well, it was so freeing.

**RAPPROCHEMENT AND DISTINCTIONS**

Jill: I think one thing about [TC 1 was] there were people from MRI, there were solution-focused people, there were narrative people. . . . There were Ericksonian people too. [I]t felt like it was all a community . . . in a way that it doesn’t feel now. It’s much more separate now. . . .

Terry: Really? That’s interesting.

Yvonne: I think . . . oh, absolutely.

Jill: There was a sense of very diverse belongingness.

Yvonne: Exactly, that’s a good description.

Jill: When I used to train, I’d put a big arc up, and it [showed a continuum] of
intentionality, and I’d say we all come from really similar ideas and worldview, but in our practice, some are more intentional, and [narrative] would be just be one of them. And I remember one year . . . somebody watched [a video of] Harlene [Anderson], and said, “You know, that really fits more for me . . . .” We had chosen a place in it . . . we all sort of fit. And I think it’s becoming more separate.

**Terry:** Among the postmodernists you’re talking about?

**Jill:** Yes, yes. Just among the postmodernists.

**Terry:** But I’m wondering if that’s a cultural thing? [W]e live in a really partisan time where people [say], “This is what I am, and you’re not, and I won’t listen to you. . . . I wonder if that’s reflecting the culture in some way. . . .

**Jeff:** I think [TC 1] reflected the way many people . . . worked. Many people were borrowing [from various approaches, using] some type of technical eclecticism with a unifying postmodern or *therapy as conversation* kind of assumptive base. . . . I think there were, and are, people out there who worked that way. And . . . in public venues like conferences, it seldom gets represented that way. ’Cause [workshop consumers want to learn how to do a specific model] . . . .

**Gene:** And I think that just the larger American context and maybe Western context, maybe world context, I don’t know, it is about duality, is about black/white, good/bad, the way we know how to watch something with interest is as a contest, where there is a winner and a loser. . . .

**Terry:** I think you’re right.

**Gene:** I think [what] all of these therapies we’re talking about share is some sort of attempt to get into a different paradigm, that it’s . . . about valuing particularities and valuing diversity and not pathologizing things, and not having to have everything be bad so that something else can be good. But I think that’s really hard to do in our culture. . . . But I think the fact that we’re sitting here having this conversation shows that . . . an awful lot of people didn’t get caught up in that. . . . You know, you care intensely about these ideas . . . and you kind of egg on your champion to out-champion the other champion, and that gets everybody in weird places.

**Yvonne:** I have yet another explanation. . . . It doesn’t contradict that one, and that is, I think that one of the ways that models develop, is they self-clarify by contrasting with other models: How are we different? How are we the same? And that’s actually just a natural way for them to develop. And so, I think that part was inevitable.

**Terry:** And healthy.

**Jill:** Well, that’s good. . . . But those developments could have happened, and there could have been more definition without things becoming so separate. . . .

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3I think “instrumentality” may be more apt than “intentionality.”

4In addition to *Therapeutic Conversations* (Gilligan & Price, 1993), which was the proceedings of TC 1, several other books in the 1990s (e.g., Eron & Lund, 1996; Friedman, 1995; Hoyt, 1994, 1996, 1998) attempted to attract readers who were interested in crossing the boundaries of the therapy approaches we were discussing.
Yvonne: . . . But then there is a part of me that thinks in some ways the splintering was a very good thing 'cause it allowed each of these approaches to continue to develop, and develop, and develop. I don’t know if they could have all developed together.

**POSITIONS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Gene: I actually think—you referred to this earlier, Yvonne—I think they, both Michael and Steve, got put in this position where . . . to be true to their ethics and the central organizing principle of their approach to therapy, they had to say certain things that were diametrically opposed, because they had very different ethics.

Jill: I don’t know if they had very different ethics. . . .

Yvonne: They had some differences.

Terry: Different principles. Steve’s is, “Don’t impose anything.”

Gene: I don’t know how Steve would articulate his, but he would see the whole kind of narrative ethic as being too organized around lefty social justice kinds of stuff, and running the risk of being judgmental or exclusive. . . .

Yvonne: You know, I never heard him say that. What I heard him say is that he thought they were apples and oranges. And the funny thing is, you know, as a person, he was a complete lefty. I’ve watched him take out every dime and dollar in his pocket and give it to a street person. He was absolutely prejudiced [in favor of] minorities of any kind. . . . However, he felt that to try to look at that in terms of therapeutic approach, for him, interfered with him being able to figure out what he called *external signifiers*—the way that the client [and therapist] would recognize . . . that things were better or worse. . . . But, he . . . could not entertain both at the same time. He felt very strongly, as a person, that [he should be acting to correct] injustices. However, he did not find it meaningful, or he did not find a way, or both, to put that in his therapeutic approach. But I think that he would have been very disappointed in someone as a person if they saw an injustice going on [and did not try to correct it]. But you couldn’t do that in therapy simultaneously, in his way of working. He didn’t know how to do both, so you had to step out of one role and step into the other. . . . I feel like [Jill and Gene] can do both. . . .

Jeff: So you’re saying he thought about that and concluded that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to do them in the same role?

Yvonne: At the same time, not even in the same role. . . . It didn’t mean that you shouldn’t try to do [that in your life], but it was just you couldn’t do it simultaneously [in therapy].

Jeff: Like, I heard him say in a workshop, “Politics has no place in the therapy room. . . .” And . . . when somebody questioned him in a workshop about his stance toward social justice, [he answered], I think . . . in his intentionally provocative way, “Most of the people who have come to [the Brief Family Therapy Center] are Black, and they don’t seem to have any problem whatsoever with
what we’re doing. . . .” But, a lot of people . . . would say that’s not an adequate conceptualization of power, social justice, race. . . .

**Yvonne:** I can see why they would say that (laughter).

**Terry:** Well, [Steve] would have said, “I have said everything I have to say about [the issue of politics and social justice]. . . . [Working to correct social injustice] isn’t consistent with the tenets of this particular approach. It isn’t that I don’t believe it, I totally believe it.” I think he would have said [that], ’cause he certainly lived [that out] more than a lot of, or most people, I know.

**Yvonne:** Well, he believed that it was something that defined the therapist as a person. . . . I remember one time sitting behind the mirror with him, and . . . the client had just left the house. She was in crisis. Her partner had been battering her and was threatening to kill her. And the session started to go on, and Steve buzzed [the] therapist and said, “You know, we need to have a plan, whether she is going to be safe when she leaves, before we go further. . . .” So, he would step out of simply adhering to the model. But for him, they were apples and oranges. I think, because of the spareness of [SFT], social justice has to be a separate activity. . . . But . . . there is nothing in SFT that interferes with somebody saying this is the right thing to do.

We probably, though, would not identify some of the times when it is needed, because our language is not as revealing that way. . . . I think, still within [SFT], there would be acceptance of doing [this]; we just might not always uncover the injustices . . . ’cause we don’t do deconstruction. . . .

**Jill:** Well, yes . . . it makes sense. But, I think . . . that deconstruction is a way of formulating the problem that locates it in the larger social context. So when we say the problem is not the problem . . . looking at the political situation [provides] a different way of naming the problem.

The next installment continues the narrative of how these approaches have developed.

**REFERENCES**


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