

Some Thoughts on the Development of Worldwork

Jan Dworkin and Lesli Mones

December 2004

Introduction

Worldwork seminars have been a rich source of learning over the last 15 years. Worldwork theory has continued to evolve and change, influenced by many factors such as: current world events, the growing body of process work theory, the social, economic, religious and racial backgrounds of the participants and facilitators, and a more differentiated understanding of social activism. We are always growing on the back of what we've previously done —learning from the so-called mistakes and successes.

During the Worldwork seminar itself, learning comes fast and furious. Our desire to synthesize and integrate our learning and hopefully contribute to the evolution of worldwork theory, inspired us (Dawn Menken, Lesli Mones, Jan Dworkin) to study the videotapes from 2004 and teach a class based on those tapes.

This was a profound experience. It was illuminating to observe ourselves wrestling with the challenges of facilitation-- both as designated and participant facilitators while the group struggled with many difficult and deep issues. Some of the issues included: secularism vs. fundamentalism, both in the community and in the world; inter-racial relationships and mixed race families; the projection of sexuality onto gay men and the concurrent marginalization of that community; the world scene post 9/11 and the Iraq war; terrorism; issues of exclusion and inclusion and the relationship to the mainstream within the worldwork community. The connection between extreme states and outer oppression reappeared a number of times underlining the relationship between personal psychology and social marginalization.

The learning format of the Worldwork seminar made it possible to experiment with new ideas and applications, including essence level work. The facilitators' willingness to grow and change under fire was inspiring. We want to thank everyone in the seminar for allowing us to study the tapes and take these learnings further. We especially want to thank Dawn Menken, our co-teacher and researcher and the participants of our class at PWCP in the spring of 2004 as well as Arny and Amy Mindell and the entire worldwork team. We hope our findings will inspire others to study and further develop the theory and practice of worldwork.

This article is primarily intended for students of worldwork who have a basic understanding of worldwork theory and practice as it has evolved thus far. Those interested in a more introductory or comprehensive study of the field, should refer to our bibliography. In this article we address two general areas of worldwork in the midst of evolution:

First we would like to look at some specific worldwork methods—sorting, consensus building and role play. We'll explore some of their strengths, drawbacks and complexities, as well as how we see them evolving. These tools were designed to facilitate a democratic process for working with large groups, which they do. However, as worldwork grows so does our understanding of how to best employ these powerful technologies.

Secondly we would like to study our approach to working with mainstream and marginalized experiences. When we began conducting Worldwork seminars, there was a tendency towards a social activism which pedestalized the victim and marginalized the so-called mainstream. This tendency gave us the opportunity to learn about different groups and their experiences of oppression. It was also an effort to right social injustices by reversing the momentary contextual rank. With time and experience we learned that this style of activism was in fact a developmental stage for working on oppression. When the momentary rank is reversed, it relieves the atmosphere. It is educational and profound to walk in another's shoes. But in the final analysis, we see that the power dynamics remain the same—simply reversed. Somebody is up and the other down—no one is seen in their complexity.

PART ONE: THE TOOLS

The tools we use are powerful. Sometimes they evoke criticism, which then becomes a part of the group process. Sorting or the setting up of a role play can inflame the atmosphere and incite accusations of dominance and control. Facilitators have been accused of using “a fundamentalist approach,” being “insiders,” “middle class,” and “American.” How did this happen? These tools were meant to foster deep democracy and freedom. This paradox caught our attention.

We see several reasons for it: 1) the methods themselves are not yet adequately developed and are still in the midst of evolution 2) the skills aren't being used well or at the right moment or with the right metaskills 3) the methods that represent the body of Worldwork represent the mainstream of Process Work in the moment and must be challenged, simply because challenging the mainstream is the group's process.

Sorting and consensus: the art of being open and closed

In order to create a democratic process in groups and communities, all voices need an opportunity to express themselves and be heard. Sorting has been used since the beginning of group process as a way to sense the atmosphere and give people an opportunity to speak. Consensus is a momentary agreement about what issue to focus on. We'll often choose a topic, give it a name and agree to begin there.

How we implement the methods of sorting and consensus building are evolving. We'll look at some of the challenges facilitators face implementing these methods and the skill sets and metaskills that may be useful. (See addendums)

In the early years we had a tendency to do endless sorting, thinking that this openness was the path to deep democracy. Sorting could take two hours with little time left for deeper exploration. At times this was appropriate; hearing from as many people as possible was the Tao of the moment. With time and experience we learned that this was not always useful and that deep democracy includes limitation. It requires being both open and closed. In a process-oriented culture it is sometimes difficult to set boundaries and say No, Stop, Enough. The concept of process is mistaken for unending openness. We have learned through trial, error and the observation of nature, that too much openness can be tedious, superficial and potentially unsafe. A group is like an individual who needs huge amounts of freedom along with strong clear boundaries in order to grow and know itself.

There are various ways to create a safe and flexible container within the sorting process. One way is by limiting the number of speakers and or the time allotted. In a tense atmosphere, this proves relieving. For example, after a period of open sorting time, a facilitator might create a boundary with a statement such as: "Let's see a show of hands for those who still need to bring up an issue... Okay, we'll take 12 more issues." This models flexibility and openness as well as the ability to make boundaries.

Recently worldwork facilitators have experimented with choosing a topic for the group, rather than sorting. This choice can be based on their sense of the group field or decided by a taoistic method that leaves the choice to nature such as spinning a pen or flipping a coin. However, even when an issue is chosen, it still is necessary to sort within that issue. For example, if the chosen issue is "terrorism" it still needs to be determined whether we are working on international terrorism, 9/11 specifically, Israel and Palestine or the terroristic atmosphere within the group. By "sorting within the issue" the facilitator holds the strong container while continuing to allow a diversity of opinions to come forward. Otherwise, the rank and power of the facilitator can be experienced as tyrannical and the group feels railroaded.

The faultline: transition from sorting to consensus

The transition from sorting to consensus is delicate, one which we liken to a fault line in the earth. This is a place and time where things have the potential to become unstable and chaotic. The “umbrella” helps tie related topics together and ease tension at the faultline. Sometimes, when a topic rises organically or has been building for days, the transition is easy—the process can hardly wait to be launched.

Other times, divergent issues compete for attention and the umbrella is insufficient. In such moments, it is impossible to avoid marginalization of topics. The marginalized topics push up against each other and the chosen topic, all vying for centrality. This creates friction between issues, tension in the facilitator and the tendency to rank issues and oppressions. There is frenzy in the group. How we negotiate the faultline is critical.

We watched ourselves on tape as we inadvertently made this faultline more unsteady and volatile, “stressing-out,” trying to choose and “name” a given topic. And we observed that regardless of the topic we chose, a topic eventually chose itself. Meaning, something became central and grabbed the group’s attention. Perhaps our job as facilitators is not to find “the topic of the day,” but to open the doorway into the group’s dreaming process in the least polarizing way. This requires trust.

But we as facilitators get bound by various concerns that may inhibit our trust of the process: political correctness, being right, time pressure, our own ranking of issues, pleasing the group, being liked, it’s endless. Let’s remember, each issue is important *and* not important. No one issue is *it*, regardless of our personal agendas.

How our biases influence sorting and consensus

We asked ourselves why certain people capture the attention of the group while others do not. We discovered several reasons: 1) they are on the pulse of the process so we are emotionally involved, 2) their double signals create a confusion that requires attention, 3) they voice an opinion which is outside of what we expect based on stereotypes (ie. a Jew denies the Holocaust) and 4) their importance is elevated due to their momentary rank (ie, a person of color in a mostly white group or a popular teacher). Often it is a combination of the above.

In one of the tapes we noticed that a man from a marginalized group was given a lot of air time during sorting while others had been passed over. We wondered why and decided to explore this further. We asked our class to watch this

segment of tape and notice why he captured their attention. Our findings were illuminating. Some people believed that his statements addressed the group's process. Others said that his low voice and difficulty expressing himself seemed in contradiction to his large physical stature and that these double signals confused them. Interesting points. More worthy of challenge and debate were those who said that they perceived his political views to be conservative and that this was in conflict with assumptions they had made based on his race. They tried to make his views fit in to their beliefs. This took some extra time and focus. Still others described him as charismatic, intelligent, compelling and attractive. We must question: Are these projections? The biases that interfere with sorting must be examined.

Getting real with role play

Role play is useful because it engages many people without requiring them to take the risk of being personal. It breaks the ice, it gets things started, it allows many dimensions of a single topic to be expressed. It illustrates and supports the diversity of the role and of the group. Without role play our attempts at deep democracy could be thwarted. Less people might participate.

However, some people don't like role-play. They accuse the method of being artificial and sometimes it is intentionally so, as stated above. But sometimes its artificiality creates tension. Role play can be like everyday consensus reality dialogue. Opinions being thrust to and fro, headlines from the newspaper, or perhaps the editorial page. But there is no personal face, nothing to grab, nothing to catch your breath, make you reflect and bring you to your edges.

Sorting also is necessary during role play. In other words, we may have a topic but our specific focus within that topic does not become clear until something real happens in the moment. We must watch for the hottest spots within the role play or a dreaming experience that catches everyone's attention. Role play is deepened by unfolding an individual's experience, rather than by listening to a multitude of voices or intellectual perspectives. In fact, flushing out a role intellectually may stall the process.

For example, during a role play about US domination, there were many talking heads. People pontificated, yelled above each other. This is natural. Such a complex and volatile topic is worthy of lengthy discourse. And for some, it is safer to stay "in the head." People spoke about ww2, bible thumping, anti-americanism, just about everything was up. Even though the issue had been "named," its essence remained elusive. Until a woman from a war torn country spoke. Suddenly everyone focused. Competitive voices dropped away. Her ability both to share personal experience and express complex political views took the discussion out of abstraction and broke the stereotypes down. She created a bridge between so-called oppressors and oppressed.

Role play at edges and hot spots

Sometimes role play is employed when the group or an individual gets to an edge. This is helpful when the edge is mentioned and we are aware that we are using role play as a form of edge work. For example, if someone is trying to criticize leadership, but is too shy, it is very helpful to name the individual edge and create a role play which momentarily depersonalizes the critic while supporting the critic's voice to come forward. The role can go over the edge when the person can not.

However, when unconsciously we resort to role play at a hot spot, it is a step backwards or at least a more circular route. This may happen when someone says something provocative which the group shies away from. For example, during a process about the accessibility of Worldwork seminars, the group discussed our comfortable venue in a hotel on the Oregon Coast. One woman stated that she enjoyed the privilege of feeling comfortable and at ease in comparison with the distress she suffered at Worldwork seminars in poorer countries. This was an honest and risky thing to say—a hot spot—and she represented a ghost role that had already been alluded to. She was consciously owning the position of privilege.

In this case the role had already become personal and a constructed role play may not have been necessary. Asking someone to interact personally with this woman could have expedited the process and taken it further. In other words, role play came after the hot spot. The question is why?

Is it too provocative to call someone out? Are we trying to protect people? Are we scared as facilitators and trying to manage the process through tools we are comfortable with?

The facilitator's fear

Groups can be unwieldy and scary; much like the world, the potential for chaos and attack is great. When sorting and consensus building become difficult, tension is high and facilitators feel responsible. One reaction to the pressure cooker is desperation. In reaction, the facilitator may develop an agenda and try to choose something—anything—just to get the group going. The group may experience this as an unacceptable use of power

When role play degenerates into chaos, facilitators lose access to their awareness and metaskills. The facilitator may over-manage such moments in order to keep themselves and the group safe. Needless to say, this backfires as well.

Certain processes may be particularly scary and threatening, depending on the facilitator's personal issues and style. For some facilitators chaos is difficult to tolerate. If chaos breaks out when a group is at an edge, it is useful for the facilitator to bring structure and awareness. However sometimes chaos is a necessary process in and of itself, particularly when a group is working on war. Allowing things to erupt or flow non-linearly mirrors the truth of war. If the facilitator attempts to create a role play in the midst of this process it will backfire. If the attempt to structure the process comes out of his or her own fear and discomfort, it is likely to elicit attack and create an even scarier situation. For the facilitator this can be exactly the fire to learn in. Or it can be traumatizing.

Some facilitators do not enjoy linear or intellectual discussion and may attempt to bring more emotion or drama to the mix. This may also be generated by fear or discomfort and can be equally problematic.

Methods and programs to manage conflict are convenient when we are afraid. But they may not allow us to develop our centeredness during the hottest fires of conflict and war. Some of us who grew up in war zones or in dysfunctional and violent families have been trained by life, given the opportunity to develop equanimity in the middle of chaos. However many of us become frozen instead. To work through the most heated conflict, we have to be uncomfortable, to face the things we are most afraid of and listen to perspectives that make our reality shake.

Being open to this kind of inner transformation is not for the weak of heart. Most of the leaders we see on tv are sheltered. Prepared speeches, formal attire and security guards protect them from confusion and unknowingness. But in a Worldwork setting there is little for the facilitator to hide behind. Part of our development as facilitators is to know when we are afraid, resist using our skills as crutches and to use our personal experiences for the benefit of the group.

PART 2: WORKING WITH MAINSTREAM AND MARGINALIZED EXPERIENCE

Process workers are interested in the experience of marginalization. That which is left out, denied and on the fringe needs a voice, whether it is relative to a person, relationship, group, or community. This perspective is at the heart of process work theory, including worldwork.

In the early stages of worldwork, we focused mainly on marginalization as it appeared in the experiences of socially oppressed groups. Worldwork continues to be of great value to those who need a voice or a venue to burn wood around issues of oppression. It is also a venue for education around social issues. One can learn a great deal about the world by listening to experiences of victimization

first hand. We can never hear too much about the effects of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc. This process of education never ends.

We began to notice, however, that supporting people in their experience of victimhood for too long is detrimental in that it freezes the so-called victim into a position of powerlessness and cements the so-called mainstream or oppressor into a position of power. In fact there comes a time when labeling someone as either “oppressed” or “mainstream” is, in itself, oppressive. People need to be seen in their totality.

In some ways we know more about the conditions and cruelties of oppression than we know about the experiences of the elusive thing called “the mainstream.” For the purposes of this article and until we find more descriptive terminology we will continue to use this archaic term. Please notice the invisible quotation marks around the term mainstream.

Rank reversals

In the “real” world, social rank has high currency. Wealthy white american males are at the top of the heap. Since the civil rights movement, this value system has been challenged in various ways and contexts, both successfully and unsuccessfully. Although wealthy white american males still remain on top, people of color have gained status as well. Some of that status comes from increased social and economic power. However some of it is derived from the mainstream’s projections. People of color are seen as wise, deep, sexual, talented, open, expressive and free, among other things. This projection is one aspect of racism—a racism that is hard to detect because of its “positive” spin. But it is racism nevertheless, and insidious. When whites disavow these “positive” qualities in themselves, they pedestalize people of color. The power that white people “give away” as a result of their projections can be just as burdensome to people of color as overt prejudice. In addition, this pedestalization is one of the many ways in which racism is devastating to whites. It robs them of huge pieces of their humanity.

In the worldwork setting, this pedestalization has not been fully understood and explored until recently. In an attempt to right social wrongs and challenge cultural assumptions, we in worldwork have tended to elevate the status of those with low social rank while challenging the status of those deemed mainstream. This is interesting for a few minutes or a few years but in the long run it doesn’t work. It is a reversal of oppression and everyone continues to suffer. Learning this has not come easy.

We started to notice that some mainstream people began to feel uncomfortable, if not hurt, in the Worldwork seminars while some minorities reported feeling patronized. This feedback woke us up and inspired us to expand our approach to working with oppression.

We went back to the study of signals. It wasn't unusual to see someone from a high social rank shaking while he spoke or being silenced and unable to protect himself. This is a double signal. If someone is only powerful, why are they shaking? Equally apparent, in listening to some oppressed people, was the strength and clarity with which they spoke and the recognition and honoring they received. Unfolding the signals of vulnerability in the mainstream and the signals of power in the oppressed, led us to recognize a momentary rank reversal within the Worldwork seminar. This is not meant to take away from the truth and impact of the social rankings in the world, but rather to acknowledge the complexity and levels of rank.

We were challenged to change our approach to working with oppression. No one is just oppressed or just powerful. The victim is powerful too. The oppressor is vulnerable.

The facilitator's relationship to marginalized groups

This realization has called on us to grow as facilitators. It has pushed us to deal with our own prejudices, stereotypes, rankings of marginalized groups and our tendencies towards political correctness and liberalism.

In general we noticed that white facilitators may be reluctant to intervene when working with people of color. This could be due to several things including: 1) the facilitator's sensitivity about white dominance and respect for the wisdom inherent in those working, 2) inner or group pressure around political correctness, 3) insufficient work on one's own racism and 4) ignorance about the culture and history of a given group.

If I haven't worked on my racism sufficiently, I will be unable to see people of color in their totality. I might be reluctant to intervene and challenge them around their double signals. In addition, if I want to be liked by the group and seen as a good ally, I might become critical of and angry at the mainstream—thus becoming a social activist and ultimately an oppressor myself. We could call this a form of racism because our behavior is misguided by color awareness.

If a white facilitator only identifies with her color and not with her rank and skills as a facilitator, she is doing a disservice to the people of color with whom she is working, particularly if they are in need of help. Needless to say, the fact of their race has little or nothing to do with their capacity to work through difficult spots. For example, if a group insists that two black men struggling in their relationship work be left alone because "the white person should stay out", they are not seeing the humanity of those men and their need for facilitation.

When the facilitator does not intervene at hot spots

the group may come in with a plethora of programs and ideas such as: “why should two black people work together”, “this shouldn’t be done in front of us”, “white people need to work on their own stuff.” While potentially valid these programs are not signal based. They have their roots in projection, stereotypes and cultural assumptions.

When facilitators are uneducated about the culture and history of those they are working with, humility and openness to learning are key.

Developmental stages for working on one’s own oppression

Dealing with the experience of oppression goes through several stages—denial, victimization, anger and revenge and eldership—but not necessarily in a linear progression. The denial phase serves as protection from pain that is too great to bear. At another point identifying with one’s victimization and hurt is essential. The process of anger and revenge is important as well. And finally, there is the elder. No one stage has more or less value. At times they exist simultaneously within one individual. They almost always exist simultaneously in a group.

For example, when the group worked on racism, three people of color took very different positions relative to the white majority. One young man felt angry and was motivated by revenge. He wanted others in the group to experience the pain and discomfort that is part of his daily life. He didn’t want to “let people off the hook.” A woman involved in the process was crying. She was able to articulate her feelings of pain and suffering. A third person was determined to stop the cycle of oppression. He refused to identify with either the victim or the oppressor role and was determined to “get off the wheel.” He expressed love and compassion for all.

Every person working on the experience of oppression needs to visit each station at some point. It is possible to be an elder as a child and to learn about your hurt or vengeance later in life. But you can’t stay an elder forever without also knowing the experience of the victim and the one who seeks revenge. We have noticed that people usually go through all the stages at some point as they grow.

Movements and communities develop around each of these stages. Some spiritual communities support the detachment of the elder; victim’s rights organization support self-defense for the victim; terrorist organizations and mainstream governments may support revenge.

When each stage is not supported and valued, a subgroup may turn on itself. Individuals may tend to promote the value of one stage over another and see individuals in other stages as “traders,” “sell-outs” or simply less developed. If each stage is valued, we can be allies for one another more easily.

Often these stages manifest as roles comprised of many individual voices. No one person can express all the qualities of each role. Only when the diversity and essence of each role is revealed, can the group move forward. Roles that are inadequately unfolded may seem superficial and draw up criticism. It is the facilitator's job to name and value every role in the field.

Developmental stages for working on privilege

Just as there are developmental stages for those who experience oppression, there are also stages for those working on privilege. Some of the stages are: denial, guilt, liberalism and awareness of one's own oppression. These stages are also roles in a group.

Very often people with privilege are not conscious of the impact their rank has on others. We tend to notice where we are wanting and when we feel downed. Denial keeps us comfortable because it prevents us from opening up to the impact of our position and behaviors. When we do wake up, most of us feel remorse and guilt. Guilt is an important stage in that it can encourage critical self-examination. But too much guilt is not useful. It creates self-hatred, hopelessness, and ultimately backlash against those who are oppressed.

Guilt can also become a motivator for doing good, pushing us to action, thus creating the "liberal position." Many good and productive liberals have been motivated by guilt. Important social movements have been built and social changes enacted because of the passionate motivation of those who desire to do good. At the root of liberalism is the belief that all people should be treated equally.

But liberalism breaks down when the good liberal sees the other as the one who suffers and in need of help. The liberal is so busy acting and doing that she splits off her own pain, vulnerability and helplessness—thus marginalizing very important dimensions of her experience. The other is forced to carry the projection of the liberal's suffering. This can be both patronizing and oppressive to the one with lower social rank. This brings us to the next stage: the one with privilege working on her own experience of oppression.

When someone with privilege is able to recognize their own rank as well as the places where they feel oppressed and powerless, they become an elder. Such a person can see the whole world—all human experiences—inside oneself. This viewpoint is available to everyone, whether they start from the experience of their oppression or from the experience of their privilege.

"Mainstreamism* "

Clearly certain groups reap social rewards by virtue of age, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. and have power over people who don't. It is those who reap social rewards that we tend to label mainstream. Based on their outer packaging or uniform, we put them in a box and assume we know who they are. We call this stereotyping, "mainstreamism (*)."

Mainstreamism is an unaddressed oppression. When we evaluate people according to surface features, we do them harm. People who reap the benefits of social privilege are not immune to the ravages of life. Social privilege is no protection from abuse, and certainly not from death or grief or the pain of being seen in one dimension.

Equally there are groups that suffer in far greater measure from lack of resources, support, legitimacy and social rank. These groups are made up of complex individuals with myriad experiences. Relating to any human being based on their social standing automatically precludes seeing them in their total humanity. This stereotyping supports isolation and prevents real connection between people with differences. Without such connections the world remains polarized.

It is essential that we penetrate these stereotypes. When you scratch the surface of any individual, you find the whole world.

Conclusion

The impetus for this article grew out of our desire to wrestle with some of the thornier issues in Worldwork. We have selected just a few of the issues which fascinate and concern us, including our most basic tools: sorting, consensus and role play, as well as our approach to working on oppression and privilege. We are aware that each of these issues leaves a lot more room for dialogue, debate and discovery. We are just skimming the surface around the complexities of rank and so called rank reversals. We are in the earliest stages of exploring the elusive phenomena known as the "mainstream." The concept of "mainstreamism" itself is brand new.

Every model needs continual critical reevaluation in order to avoid fundamentalism. Too often we have seen social movements mirroring the very problems they were intending to resolve.

We have a powerful technology both in our toolkit and in our awareness. Let's be vigilant about our self-examination. We hope some of the ideas presented in this article will add both tools and awareness to the growing body of worldwork theory and practice.

*Thanks to Barbara Burkhardt for coining the term "mainstreamism."