

Therapist-Activist Workshop in Oakland  
- Cathy Lieb, LCSW

To some, therapist activism sounds like an oxymoron. But not to over 60 psychotherapists who gathered in Oakland on April 17 to participate in a unique and provocative workshop entitled, "Therapist Activism and Clinical Practice in a Time of War and Repression". The California Society for Clinical Social Work sponsored this event and it was organized by a Bay Area group called Therapists for Peace and Justice.

Using a panel discussion format, the speakers challenged the notion that therapists can operate in a zone of complete neutrality, especially in these times of war, terrorism and global communication. They proposed that at the very least clients will infer their therapist's political views and this will impact the therapeutic work in some way. Provocative clinical case examples articulated questions and posed ideas for working at the intersection of political events and clinical issues. How does the therapist work with the conflicts in a Moslem/Christian couple when the nation of the therapist and one of the partners is at war with the country of origin of the other partner? What meaning does a client's active support of the National Rifle Association have within the therapeutic alliance when the therapist agrees or disagrees with the positions of this organization? How does the spiraling cycle of violence in the world impact clients and therapists alike? Should we bring up the topic of war in sessions or supervision? What do we do when our clients bring it up?

A major point repeated throughout the sessions was that both therapists and clients are experiencing a broad range of emotions in response to the current world situation - fear, anger, despair - as well as a similar array of coping methods from denial to activism. The founding members of Therapists for Peace and Justice began meeting after 9/11 in an effort to support each other through that national crisis. What followed were ongoing discussions about the U. S. response, the sharing of resources and dialogue about peace and war and how to deal with these issues as individuals, therapists and supervisors.

Since that first meeting Therapists for Peace and Justice have sponsored speakers, collaborated to write an article discussing the intersection of therapy and political activism and, not lacking a sense of humor, have marched together under the banner, "War is depressing." Another group of psychotherapist-activists, Therapists for Social Responsibility, formed a year ago in Sacramento, with similar concerns. They have developed a website, [therapistsforsocialresponsibility.org](http://therapistsforsocialresponsibility.org), which is being shared by both groups.

Activist juices were flowing the second half of the conference in small group discussions as participants explored how to take the ideas of the workshop out into their practices and communities. One of the most spirited discussions followed a presentation about The Patriot Act which many feel jeopardizes fundamental civil liberties and feeds into the climate of fear and hate-mongering in the US. Participants strategized about how to get information about the conflict between the Patriot Act and confidentiality to the Board of Behavioral Sciences and into the course requirements for all BBSE accredited courses on law and ethics.

Participants left this training with more questions than answers. But, perhaps, this is as it should be. Prior to the proliferation of managed care and the medicalization of mental health, the profession of psychotherapy had deep roots in progressive ideas and politics. Concern and work for the well-being of the individual was linked to concern and activism in the larger environment. For therapist-activists the path towards tapping back into this laudable tradition and reclaiming a professional voice for peace and justice in the world community may well be found through artfully asking the challenging questions.

Cathy Lieb, LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice in Sacramento and is a founding member of Therapists for Social Responsibility.