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APA Poster Proposal

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Creative Evolution, Henri Bergson, and Psychotherapy:

A Postmodern Evolution

Dedicated to my dear friend and revolutionary mentor Lois Holzman. Without Lois's motivational spark this paper would have never existed!

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During the earlier part of the 20th century, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was received as a popular and distinguished professor of philosophy. His popularity sprang from his book entitled Creative Evolution (1911/1998), which questioned the favored teleological and mechanistic adaptations of Darwinian and Spencerian evolution. In fact, William James stated of Creative Evolution “you are a magician, and your book is a marvel, a real wonder in the history of philosophy, making, if I mistake not, an entirely different era in respect to matter...” (as cited in Scharfstein, 1943, p. 3). Although his popularity was quieted by Russel’s criticism (Moore, 1996), Bergson’s philosophy has been revisited with the coming of postmodern thought (i.e. Deleuze, 1988). Notably, Bergson has been identified as a founder of postmodern thought (see, e.g., Matthews, 1996; Griffin et al., 1993). Bergson wrote on a number of diverse subjects, however, the focus of this poster session is on the central concepts embedded in Creative Evolution. In particular, his concepts of the “intellect,” “intuition,” and “elán vital” will be explored, including their implications for the practice of psychotherapy.

The first chapter of Creative Evolution argues that evolution is non-mechanistic and non-teleological. The thesis of the book is that life cannot be equated to mathematical manipulations; it is therefore endlessly creative. To illustrate, Bergson (1911/1998) states that “organic creation, on the contrary, the evolutionary phenomena which properly constitute life, we cannot in any way subject to a mathematical treatment” (p.20). He further illustrates how science (psychology) legitimizes itself by its own measurement (i.e. its mathematical tools), creating its own epistemology of life. How is an epistemology created and sustained? Bergson replies, “like

ordinary knowledge in dealing with things, science is only concerned with the aspect of repetition” (p. 29).

In terms of psychotherapy, this “ordinary knowledge” is legitimized through our storytelling. For instance, Efran, Lukens, & Lukens (1991) state that “with repetition, stories harden into realities, sometimes trapping storytellers within the boundaries that the storytellers have helped to create” (p. 80). For the postmodern psychotherapist, “ordinary knowledge” develops as an adversary that entraps even the most experienced practitioner. The entrapment of “ordinary knowledge” may never allow us to question our practices and more importantly the quality of therapy as determined by our clients. To avoid entrapments, I believe we should make use of two of the concepts Bergson created—intuition and *élan vital* .

In Creative Evolution the concept of “intuition” is introduced. Bergson (1911/1998) describes intuition this way: “Intuition may bring the intellect to recognize that life does not quite go into the category of the many nor yet into that of the one; that neither mechanical causality nor finality can give a sufficient interpretation of the vital process...” (pp. 177-178). According to Russell (1972), “intuition” is best described as instinct as opposed to “intellect”—a mechanism to recognize becoming states; intellect separates things.

Psychology’s inclination and adherence to the scientific model creates an “ordinary knowledge” that legitimizes the “intellect” (Newman and Holzman, 1999). In psychotherapy, the “intellect” tendency can be sampled from the following: a search for an interpretation (i.e. Freud, 1938/1949), for explanatory schemas (i.e. Beck, 1976), for a solution (i.e. Haley, 1976), for a treatment plan (i.e. Wolpe, 1958), and for a “single way of doing therapy” (i.e. Lazarus, 1989). In psychotherapy, there seems to be an absence or an ignorance of “intuition”. I suppose the

challenge for second millennium psychotherapists is to choose whether “intellect” or “intuition” more directly benefit clients, therapists, or both.

Probably the most profound concept in Creative Evolution is “elán vital.” Like the book itself, the concept of elán vital developed as a response to the mechanistic and teleological paradigms of Spencerian and Darwinian evolution. The elán vital represents the life spirit, as a continuous drive that endlessly creates and reshapes our existence. Essentially, the elán vital is the driving life force that endlessly creates without mechanistic and teleological implications. Bergson (1911/1998) states that “it is a creation that goes on for ever in virtue of an initial moment” (p. 105). He further states “that evolution does not mark out a solitary route, that it takes directions without aiming at ends, and that it remains inventive even in its adaptations” (p. 102).

For the practicing therapist, the elán vital is apt to resonate more than the writings of theoreticians who speak endlessly about various methods and techniques. I am convinced that Efran, Lukens, and Lukens (1991) captured how the elán vital resonates in their practice. They state “in therapy, two or more individuals meet and form a novel coupling that enables them to carve out new distinctions. In the process . . . they breathe life into alternatives that had no previous experience” (p. 197). The activity of the individuals as “linguaging” to achieve a coupling represent the force that endlessly creates or “breathes life into alternatives” without previous experience.

The above thus far represents “fumblings” for an integration of Bergsonian ideas with existing practitioners (primarily postmodern psychotherapists). I believe that Bergson’s concepts overcome the mechanistic and teleological tendencies as the fulcrum of a postmodern

evolutionist. In that, I would like to further highlight some recent postmodern approaches that seem to capture the essence of Bergsonian concepts.

As Bergson demonstrated, life is endlessly creative. Similarly, Newman and Holzman (1999) purport that humans are not stars in space to be studied as objects (relying on “intellect”). Further, they state that “revolutionary activity is all process, creatively and constantly emergent” (p. 33). The revolutionary activity is a “creative evolution”—an “*élan vital*”. Likewise, Gergen’s (1991) and McNamee’s (1996) practice of postmodern therapy seems to deconstruct “ordinary knowledge,” thereby acknowledging the role of “intuition.” That is, a client is no longer an object of study; the client is a participant. Therefore, I believe postmodern psychotherapists are generally more aligned to Bergsonian concepts than are modernistic therapists.

In conclusion, psychotherapists must create endless methods of “doing psychotherapy” that adapt to the unique clinical context that each client brings in. Likewise, Anderson and Levin (1998) remind psychotherapists that “each clinical stance is different, each problem is different, and each person is different” (p. 65). To build upon this, I think that each moment creates the kind of engagement described by Anderson and Levin. Therefore, neither an abstraction nor a deductive system can ever produce static and objectified human as a treatment subject; there are endless variations to be accounted for. It was Bergson (1911/1998) who stated that “in this sense it might be said of life, as of consciousness, that at every moment it is creating something” (p. 29). I believe the integration of “Bergsonian” concepts to psychotherapy represents a postmodern development, and above all, a challenge to therapists to accept or reject a Bergsonian perspective for the new millennium.

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