

Inserting Critical Social Justice Praxis into Mainstream Therapy— the Broaching Tool

Introduction

In the first few years of the 21st century, activist scholars and activist clinicians faced a conundrum. They had made significant inroads into the therapy field: gaining power and influence in the professional bodies especially within the American Psychological Association (APA). They were also reworking the narrative of counselling and psychotherapy: therapy was starting to be characterised as the product of an oppressive European society and in urgent need of decolonisation. But, on the ground, traditional therapy continued to be practised and taught as before: the influence of Critical Social Justice (CSJ) was limited to the academy and therapy bureaucracies.

As CSJ wasn't embedded in generic therapy practice, there was a big gap between —to use their terms—ideology and praxis. Without praxis in place, it would be difficult to achieve the activists' long term goals: to centre the cultural and societal context of the client's problems and use the clinical space for a political moral re-education project.

In this essay, I will be showing how activist theorists/clinicians worked to resolve this problem. In essence, they developed strategies linked to multicultural competence which could be framed as important new generic tools for the wider field. These new methods were specifically designed to insert CSJ praxis into mainstream therapy. In this essay I will be discussing one particular example of this strategy: *broaching* (NB italicised to indicate a specialised meaning applied to therapy, in quote marks to indicate the general term) , a now established and accepted therapy tool taught in the training institutions.

I intend to show how the completely uncontested embrace of this tool by the therapy field is the consequence of CSJ rhetorical tactics—in this case a lethal combination of changing the common everyday definition of the term 'broaching' and the deployment of the 'motte and bailey' rhetorical strategy (see below).

I will start by laying out these rhetorical tools before discussing how they were deployed in the particular case of *broaching*.

CSJ rhetorical strategies

As people are becoming increasingly aware, the culture wars are characterised by battles over language—terminology, in particular. The person or group who controls the definition of words controls the territory. CSJ, due to its postmodern underpinnings, views language as the means by which society is socially constructed: the narratives or discourses of culture generate the social world. Consequently, if you are going to change society you will need to be able to control and change language. We can see this playing out in the vicious wars being played out around the definition of the term 'woman' at the moment. Definitions are key.

Of course, this is not the only strategy, as noted by many commentators, CSJ displays a genius in its tactical deployment of rhetorical moves—one being the 'motte and bailey strategy' —first identified by [Nicholas Schakel](#). For readers unfamiliar with its operation here it is in summary. It refers to the classic castle fortification style used by the Normans in the early mediaeval period in Europe. Their very successful colonisation of adjacent lands was achieved through its deployment. The motte is a mound upon which is constructed a heavily fortified central tower (termed the keep), the bailey is the surrounding land enclosed by lesser defences comprising wooden palisades and ditches. Inside the bailey would be buildings with various functions such

as food storage and workshops e.g. smithies. When under attack the people/soldiers would try to hold the outer bailey and, if these defences were breached, they would retreat back into the impenetrable castle keep on the motte. When the threat had passed, then the people would emerge again into the bailey and beyond. It was very difficult for the indigenous people to eliminate the Normans from their territory once a network of motte and bailey type fortifications were established. So how does this analogy translate into the moves employed by a colonising force that wants to impose an ideology rather than physical occupation?

As follows. The motte is the completely defensible position, one that no one would oppose because a) most reasonable people would agree with it and b) opposing it would inevitably lead to the accusation of a moral failing on the opponent's part. An example of a familiar motte would be: "Social justice is an important societal goal". The bailey (the land around the motte) would be marked out by an expanded or new meaning of the terms used for the motte. In the case of the example given here, the bailey boundary would be marked out by a definition informed by CSJ such as: "Society is systematically oppressive and its institutions need to be dismantled for true social justice to be achieved". To push the analogy a bit further, the buildings on the land enclosed within the bailey would comprise structures that consolidate or bolster the new/expanded definition such as theoretical frameworks, bureaucratic policies, and taskforces. So, an example in this case would be CSJ-informed Diversity, Inclusion and Equity policies. Any critique levelled at the bailey (the new or expanded definition and the structures predicated on it) will result in a withdrawal back into the original defensible position of the motte: "Social justice is an important societal goal". This defensive move will usually result in the questioner being set on the back foot—no one would argue that social justice was a bad idea—and easily characterised as a bigot. Once the immediate threat has passed by and sufficient time has elapsed it will be perceived as safe to come out of the keep and re-occupy the bailey. Nothing changes.

This is a rhetorical tactic in a postmodern colonisation process. Ideas are not engaged with in the public square using evidence and reason as they are in the liberal Western Enlightenment tradition: instead, the metaphorical land grab happens through establishing and holding a set of defensible positions. Once these are in place, they will be used as anchors to hold a network of contestable ideas in place. Over time, the contestable ideas become established through repetition as uncontested and then the territory is secured. In the first decade of the new millennium, the therapy field was blissfully unaware of postmodern rhetorical strategies, consequently it has been a push over—not helped by the [craven failure by established traditional clinical theorists](#) to offer any critique of an ideological takeover.

What is commonly meant by the term 'broaching'?

Before we consider how *broaching*—a tool of CSJ praxis—became an established generic therapeutic method, we just need to say something about its commonly accepted meaning including the important distinction between 'raising' and 'broaching' a subject.

We all know what it means to bring someone's attention to a subject. We have all done it at some time or other. In our personal lives we will have needed to bring up a potentially sensitive issue concerning money, bad habits, sex, lies, etc. And in our professional capacity as therapists, we will also need to talk about something that isn't necessarily on the client's agenda: this could range from something mundane such as negotiating holidays through to more sensitive matters such as challenging the client on repeated behavioural patterns or drawing their attention to a potentially unconscious process.

Raising and broaching overlap in meaning: both concern the deliberate act of bringing something to the other person's attention. However, and this is important, broaching is a stronger version: it is not just alerting someone to a particular matter but in addition persisting in making it the subject of ongoing discussion. In other words, the person who broaches the subject is going to attempt to hold the conversation to that issue. In a conversation this would represent a power move as one person is going to impose their agenda on the other (this is just a statement of fact and should not be taken to imply a moral judgement).

How would the act of broaching be viewed in traditional therapy practice

In general, in mainstream therapy approaches, the client's agenda is sacrosanct. The therapist provides a functionally neutral and apolitical clinical space wherein the client can make use of a professional therapeutic relationship to work through their presenting issue(s). All the professional codes promote the client's autonomy and issue warnings about the therapist imposing their own agenda onto the client (see, for example, [The American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics \[Section A.4.b. Personal Values\]](#) "Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors."). Consequently, and historically, the act of broaching has not received much positive attention. In traditional therapy training programmes, students would be taught how to raise issues with their clients in a sensitive and appropriate way but this intervention would be in service to the client's issues and process.

However, it is important to note that the therapy field is pluralistic and different therapy schools have particular views on what is required for therapeutic change and this will shape how the therapist works with the client. Consequently, there is a continuum of attitudes towards therapists' interventions. At one end would be person-centred counselling in which the therapist will follow the client's process without intervention through to the psychodynamic school where the therapist will actively bring the client's attention to unconscious patterns influencing the client's concerns.

It is worth saying a little more about the psychodynamic approach as the Frankfurt School (originators of Critical Theory) viewed Freud's psychoanalytical theory as sympathetic to Marxist concepts of 'false consciousness' (see [recent scholarly work](#) on this matter). In the latter, Marx theorised that members of the working class were conditioned by the dominant classes to think along certain lines that were counterproductive to their own class interests. In order to liberate them from this oppression, the working class needed to become aware of this conditioning and develop 'critical consciousness'—the ability to detect the workings of oppressive societal forces. Freud's theories represented the equivalent but theorised at an individual level focussing on the shaping forces of family. Given this accordance it is not surprising that the methods used in psychodynamic therapy—particularly those used to bring the client's attention to bear on identifying unconscious factors implicated in the client's presenting issue—would be of interest to CSJ activist clinicians. In other words, the psychodynamic practice of offering interpretations is a type of broaching and offers a template that can be transferred into a method for centring the collective unconscious factors as defined by CSJ. In the following section we will see how that was done.

Establishing *broaching* as a generic method in counselling practice.

Broaching appears to have been accepted as a counselling method in generic therapy practice in a remarkably short period of time despite a minimal research evidence base and no public

critique; these two facts are indicative of something that has been artificially inserted into the therapy field rather than a tool which has developed through a process of testing, research and clinical observations.

The method was first coined in a [2007 paper by Day-Vines and colleagues](#) rapidly adopted as a tool to be used to comply with multicultural competencies and is taught to students on training programmes. Now counsellors have at their disposal a crude implement which they are enjoined to deploy in order to centre the societal/cultural/political factors that are believed to be always implicated in the client's concerns.

To gain a better understanding of how CSJ methods were able to be shoehorned into mainstream therapy I am returning to discuss the 2007 seminal paper that introduced the *broaching* method. Although, over the following decade or so there have been refinements and further iterations, this highly-cited paper (441) laid down the foundational principles and is an instructive exemplar of how CSJ praxis gained its foothold. There is a great deal that could be said in regard to this paper but, due to limitations of space, the discussion is going to be limited to identifying the key moves used to insert a new CSJ method into the field.

The beginning: Establishing the motte

So, to return to the CSJ rhetorical strategies described earlier to support the process of colonising a territory. The first step is establishing the motte. This is place that people return to when the weaker bailey is attacked. It takes the form of a position that cannot be argued against. In this case it is:

Counsellors need to have frameworks and tools which help them talk about the difficult issues of racial/ethnic/cultural context with their clients.

(You can watch a one minute section [1.58-2.53] from [Dr Day-Vines being interviewed](#) recently about the *broaching* method and articulating this very reasonable position.)

Who could possibly argue with this stance, and more to the point, who would want to? It is a laudable goal.

However, the position advocated in the bailey is very different indeed as we shall see.

Stage 1: Creating the bailey defences

The next step involves marking out the intellectual territory to be occupied around the motte in the form of a boundary. As noted earlier, this move will very often make use of a redefinition of terms. In particular, the meaning will either be expanded or changed. This step is a crucial one as in postmodern rhetorical practice this is where sleights-of-hand take place—in other words the substitution of one meaning for another.

In the case of this paper, the term 'broaching' will need to be defined in such a way that allows it to be used for CSJ purposes. So here is the definition which is given first in the abstract and then restated and expanded upon within the paper.

"The authors define broaching as the counselor's ability to consider how sociopolitical factors such as race influence the client's counseling concerns."

One can immediately see that this is not just a specialised definition of the term but one that has no discernible connection to the commonly accepted meaning of 'broaching'. At the most basic functional analysis, the action/behaviour of 'broaching'—something a person does—is magically

turned into attributes, in this case ‘ability’—something a person possesses. Furthermore, this ‘ability’ is not general but has a very narrowly defined target. Following these rules, anything can be redefined as anything one chooses. I invite the reader to play the postmodern definition game here and substitute other terms for ‘broaching’ in the definition given above.

The authors of this paper must have realised that this new specialised definition was completely unanchored in everyday parlance and, so, they need to make a move to reconnect it in some way. This move is made later on in the paper when they expand further on the definition and state that there is a set of behaviours associated with *broaching*.

So, what do we finally arrive at through this tortuous disingenuous process? *Broaching* meshes critical consciousness (the ability to read contextual social/political factors in the clients’ issues) with praxis (associated behaviours that centre said factors in the clinical conversation). Critical Theory is now locked into a method that is presented to the field as a new generic tool.

To return to our mediaeval fortification analogy, this new definition of ‘broaching’ comprises the wooden palisades and ditches forming the defences of the bailey. The territory around the motte has been secured.

Stage 2: Occupying the bailey

Once the bailey is established, the territory surrounding the motte is available for occupation. Translated into the intellectual realm, this move is sometimes, but not always, accompanied by a call to action. In Day-Vines *et al*’s original paper, possibly because they were proffering a new method, they advocate for the importance of counsellors using this new tool. Their rationale is based on the power differential between counsellor and client; clients may not feel they can raise issues of culture/race etc, explaining that: “The client may also have trepidations that the counsellor will withdraw emotional support and empathy, negate and deny the existence of the client’s interpretation of phenomena, and possibly pathologize the client as paranoid, militant, or overly sensitive (e.g., ...)” p.404.

No one would deny the potential for the inherent power imbalance operating in the client-therapist relationship to influence what the client feels safe to bring to therapy. A significant body of research in the 1990’s (see [David Rennie’s seminal work](#)) uncovered the extent to which the client’s deference to the therapist was oblivious to the therapist. Therefore, on the surface this rationale makes sense. However, the persuasiveness of this argument is fatally undermined when we consider that the rationale of power differential could be used to support the opposite position: clients who do not consider societal/political issues to be significant factors may feel compelled to discuss these if the counsellor consistently brings this into the counselling conversation. Power relations are both far more complex and subtle than a rigid reductive ideology such as CSJ can possibly entertain.

It is, unfortunately, an indicator of the declining intellectual rigour that obtains in the therapy professions that such obvious counter arguments were not offered at the time of publication. I have asserted [elsewhere](#) that eminent senior clinician-theorists have done the field a disservice by not making any objections to CSJ capture.

Final stage: Building structures in the bailey

In mediaeval times, once the bailey had been established then functional structures would be erected behind the protective palisades. So how does this concrete analogy work when translated into its intellectual equivalent?

In the case of *broaching*, the new definition of the term lays the ground for conceptual frameworks and stances that are informed by CSJ. These ideological commitments will not be transparently identified as a particular approach to therapy: instead, *broaching* will be presented as an evolution of generic therapy methods. We can see these foundations being laid out in the original paper as follows:

- The paper's authors "present a conceptual framework for differentiating among five broaching styles: (a) avoidant, (b) isolating, (c) continuing/incongruent, (d) integrated/congruent, and (e) infusing" (p.404). They describe this as a continuum but it is clear from the value-laden descriptors that what they really mean is a hierarchy. 'Avoidant behaviour' is linked to race-neutral perspectives. At the other end of the continuum (or, stated more accurately, the top of this hierarchy) is the 'infusing' counsellor. Here the paper's authors make the CSJ praxis explicit, stating that "These counsellors also have an enduring commitment to social justice which transcends the bounds of their professional identity. We proffer that infusing counselors can function as change agents" (p.406). Or, in other words, social justice activists.
- In order to bolster this typology along stratified lines, the authors link it to already established conceptual frameworks, in this case [Helm's White Racial Identity Development model](#): an explicitly hierarchical framework which places "color-blind perspectives on race" at the bottom and at the top an "internalised multicultural identity with non-racist Whiteness at its core".
- The client's position is also addressed within these intellectual structures and frameworks. The authors consider variations in clients' responses to *broaching* behaviour. They surmise that clients with a low level of racial identity functioning may resist their therapist's efforts to engage them in identity conversations. The authors believe that these clients need help to "deal effectively with racist encounters; otherwise, clients may be apt to blame themselves or make excuses about systems of dominance when confronted with certain circumstances" (p.408).

So, to sum up, what is being laid out here? In essence it is the intellectual/conceptual means of bolstering a method for centring the CSJ agenda in clinical practice. One crucial feature is that there is no possibility of any legitimate objection to the method. Resistance to the use of *broaching* by the counsellor will be automatically pathologised as incompetence/racism/naivety: resistance by the client will also be pathologised as ignorance in requirement of moral re-education.

It is tempting here to note parallels with psychodynamic/psycho-analytic practice where similar Kafkaesque traps can and do operate: any resistance offered to theoretically-informed interpretations can be negatively characterised as an unconscious defence.

Consequences

There is no space in this paper to consider what has been built on these foundations—the main aim has been to show how a colonising process operates, in particular how a piece of territory is originally captured and subsequently held. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that structures which bolster this particular CSJ praxis have developed and proliferated. The bailey land is no longer just a building site: [the original stances and frameworks have been further conceptualised and](#)

[finessed](#). The range of the applications of *broaching* has broadened (it has been imported into associated professional practices such as [clinical supervision](#)). And, its remit has been expanded: *broaching* is even being mooted [as a method for white therapists working with white clients](#) to introduce the salience of race no matter what issue the client is bringing.

Activist clinicians, educators and scholars have been diligently working to establish *broaching* as the counselling method of first choice. Any attempt to engage in critique (e.g. of the instrumental character of *broaching*) or participate in any kind of constructive criticism will be framed as an attack that triggers a withdrawal to the motte (the importance of helping counsellors develop ways of talking to their clients about the socio-political factors implicated in their issues). As a vehicle for importing CSJ praxis into mainstream therapy, especially therapy education, it has been very successful. No pushback—job done!

Traditional practices which approach the client as a unique individual will soon become memories from a previous age characterised as reactionary and oppressive. The profession is being shifted from subtle nuanced complex perspectives on healing—when sometimes cultural differences are all important and sometimes they hardly figure at all—to a rigid narrow reductive moral re-education project which prioritises just one dimension of the client's life: their identity. CSJ-driven therapy can only be formulaic, prescriptive and instrumental.

Conclusion by way of etymology

It is always worth considering the derivation and etymology of terms as going back to how the original meanings of words can be illuminating. Of course, the notion that the roots of a word have any bearing on how it is used is antithetical to a postmodern project such as CSJ which views the meaning of words as socially-constructed and politically-motivated.

However, modern disciplines would strongly disagree with this ungrounded postmodern perspective. [Cognitive linguistics](#), for example, asserts that language has an embodied dimension. Communicating with words arose through making abstract analogies with concrete reality. Thus, for example, the physical action of getting hold of an object is metaphorically transferred onto the abstraction of 'grasping' an idea. And, there is [a body of evidence now that usage of particular metaphors](#), such as 'grasping an idea' activates the same firing pattern in the brain as does the actual physical action of grasping. Simply stated, the words we use have some link with reality. Yes, words change their meaning over time but not in a random way or imposed by some outside source: it is a more organic process grounded in the real world. This intuition causes us to instinctively reject false definitions imposed from elsewhere.

So, what can a brief investigation into the etymology of the term 'broaching' tell us? The original meaning of 'broach' was to pierce or thrust through. It comes from the Latin *broccus* or *broccus* meaning 'projecting' (particularly in relation to teeth)—*brocca* was the vulgar Latin name for a pointed tool. By the time we reach the early mediaeval period, broaching was the term used for the act of piercing or breaking open something (usually a cask).

Our current everyday usage is the result of a figurative turn in the 16th century succinctly laid out by [Hensleigh Wedgwood in his Dictionary of English Etymology, \(1859\)](#): "To broach a cask is to pierce it for the purpose of drawing off the liquor, and hence, metaphorically, to broach a business, to begin upon it, to set it a going." However, the original meaning hasn't completely disappeared: it is still retained in current technical usage of the term 'broach' to mean a long thin pointed tool designed to make holes or incisions.

Therefore, from an etymological point of view, I would argue that the coinage of *broaching* as a new specialised counselling term can't shake off deeper embodied resonances of a forceful rupture or intrusion. And, we should bear that in mind.

And so, Reader, what will happen when the client first enters the activist therapist's clinic? The client's issues are easy to diagnose: in one cursory glance the therapist notes the most obvious intersecting identities and knows what the work will entail. The client sits down, the therapist opens the toolbox and selects the *broaching* implement.

And let's just pause the video there for a second and return to the etymology. One thing I didn't mention. In the early mediaeval period the term 'broach' was a synonym for sexual penetration.

And, now as we press the play button, our etymological eyes can predict with a high degree of probability that this is the moment when a violation will take place; the client's trust will be betrayed and their autonomy over-ridden.

CSJ praxis is being inserted into mainstream practice replacing a healing ethos with another antitherapeutic agenda. And this is how our traditional professions end—not with a bang but a whimper—as a sharp toothed tool is inserted and twisted, rupturing the healing container.

Reference

Day-Vines, N. L., Wood, S. M., Grothaus, T., Craigen, L., Holman, A., Dotson-Blake, K., & Douglass, M. J. (2007). Broaching the subjects of race, ethnicity, and culture during the counseling process. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 85*(4), 401–409. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00608.x>