

Psychodramatic group therapy celebrates its 100th birthday: A parallel process with our current socio-political experience

In this latest Experiential Column series, Scott Giacomucci, DSW, LCSW, CTTS, CET III, PAT, discusses the relevance of psychodrama and sociodrama in therapy and their relationship to real world events and healing.

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History repeating itself has been seen countless times within the past, and now with coronavirus, there is yet another time where events have unfolded in paralleled ways to events in human history.

It is April 1, 1921, in downtown Vienna. The Austro-Hungarian Empire has recently collapsed, and revolt is in the air. War and the Spanish Flu pandemic have decimated entire populations leading to a staggering number of deaths. Disputes continue about new leadership and a new structure for governance. Thirty-two-year-old psychiatrist, Jacob Levy Moreno, is to appear before an audience of over a thousand, including politicians, cultural leaders, and foreign dignitaries. As the theater curtain rises, Moreno appears on stage alongside an empty chair resembling a throne with a gilded crown resting on its cushion.

With no script and no actors, Moreno addresses the audience giving voice to the restlessness within Viennese society. Highlighting the collective drama of social conflict playing out in the daily lives of the audience, he attempts to turn the audience into actors and insists that they rise to the throne (the empty chair on stage) and offer new ideas for how they would lead the country through this time of change. Multiple participants responded to the invitation, sitting in the empty chair to try on the role of the new leader, but none that fully satisfied the audience who had transformed into a jury. The event ends without a leader of the “new world order.” Though the newspapers declared it a failure, this historical event marks the first psychodrama/sociodrama (and the first use of the empty chair technique).

The inspiration for Moreno’s leadership on this night evolved from his vision of *Sociatry* – or healing for society (Giacomucci, Karner, Nieto, & Schreiber, in-press). He believed that work with individuals was not enough and that we needed to

promote healing within all of society through group work. He hoped that the theater would serve as a vehicle for a creative revolution that would change the world.

April 1, 2021, we will celebrate the 100th year since this historic event. Coincidentally, the socio-cultural conflict from which this first psychodrama and sociodrama emerged resembles what we are experiencing today in 2021. Collective trauma, social unrest, a worldwide pandemic, shifts in political power, and changes in political leadership are the backdrop for the centennial psychodrama anniversary this year. Reflecting on this inaugural presentation of psychodrama in his autobiography, Moreno describes Austria as “restless, in search of a new soul” (2019, p. 206). Coincidentally, President Biden’s inaugural speech stated a goal “to restore the soul of America – [which] requires more than words.” Moreno would certainly agree, quickly emphasizing the importance of action in both the psychotherapeutic and socio-political context. The similarities between the social atmospheres of 1921 and 2021 are hard to ignore. But why is history important or relevant?

Philosopher George Santayana once said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In other words, “History repeats itself.” As group psychotherapists and psychologists, we recognize the relevance of our clients’ histories as they relate to their current presentation and future goals. In the same way, our collective history is important to revisit to celebrate the goodness, better understand ourselves, and work through past traumas. Without analyzing and integrating our history, we cannot fully understand ourselves, our profession, or our culture. The social unrest and political changes after World War I proved fertile ground for the germination of Moreno’s methods and group psychotherapy in general. In the years following 1921, group therapy grew and was quickly incorporated into the culture. (Moreno coined the terms “group therapy” or “group psychotherapy” in 1932 at the American Psychiatric Conference in Philadelphia.) Group work fulfilled important needs including providing opportunities for education, connection, healing, empowerment, and cost-effective treatment. Group therapy’s popularity appears to have increased significantly in response to collective traumas such as World War II. It is only fitting then that the group therapy community responds to the needs of society today—suffering from not only a collective trauma but also extraordinary isolation, loss, and disconnection.

The United States is currently facing what is perhaps the biggest existential crisis of our time—a deadly pandemic on top of compounding social issues and political instability. Just as COVID-19 impacts one’s respiratory system and can lead to difficulty breathing, the coronavirus and our social conflicts are suffocating us socially, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. They appear to have also amplified divisions existing within society. These divisions have escalated to the point of

manifesting a violent insurrection that targeted the United States Capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election. Throughout the pandemic, discrimination and disregard for human rights has become more palpable, especially towards communities of color, immigrants/refugees, religious minorities, and the LGBTQ community. Group workers are needed now more than ever to facilitate to promote both intrapsychic and social change through inter-group dialogue, social action, community work, organizational consultation, support groups, and group psychotherapy.

Now is the time for group therapy and group work in all its configurations to take action in restoring the soul of America, which will require much more than words. It will require authentic connection, integrity, humility, leadership, and empowerment. Restoring the soul of America will require us to cultivate, trust, and challenge the potential leadership within others, just like Moreno did on April 1, 1921. It makes us an audience of jurors tasked with holding our leaders accountable. Restoring the soul of America requires us to muster the courage to rise from the audience and sit in the empty chair offering our ideas, our energy, and our love for the future. It requires all of us to access our own leadership and emerge as co-creators and co-initiators of a new era.

References

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