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# Healing Communal Wounds: A Role for Psychology in Addressing Social Ills
## A Review of Sociodrama and Collective Trauma by Peter Felix Kellermann

Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007. 191 pp. ISBN 978-1-84310-446-9. $29.95, paperback

**David Manier**

Many psychologists today are open to interdisciplinary approaches, especially because of recent advances in fields like neurobiology and psychopharmacology. But crossing the disciplinary divide in the direction of the social sciences is less modish. Perhaps, as some have argued, this expresses a “collective fear of the collective” (Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Yet there is a growing recognition that psychologists may have an important role to play in ameliorating ills that affect not just individuals, but societies (cf. Lambert, 2008). An example is the work of Herbert Kelman (2006), who formed an association with Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs to address psychological issues related to social justice and international conflict (see http://www. wcfia.harvard.edu/ seminars/07_kelman and http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/picar). Anthony Marsella has developed extensive scholarship on topics related to ethnocultural aspects of trauma, including work fostered through his role as president of Psychologists for Social Responsibility (Marsella, Johnson, Watson, & Gryczynski, 2007; see also http://www.psysr.org/).

Related work, focusing especially on the treatment of traumatized refugees and torture victims, has been completed by Richard Mollica (2006), director of the Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma (see http://www.hprt-cambridge.org/), and Allen Keller, director of the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture (Hooberman, Rosenfeld, Lhewa, Rasmussen, & Keller, 2007; see also http://www.survivorsoftorture.org/). It is in this context of growing psychological interest in the problem of collective trauma that Kellermann's monograph Sociodrama and Collective Trauma should be read.

### The Individual and the Collective

As mentioned above, psychologists have generally been most comfortable using a methodology that focuses on individuals in isolation from the myriad sociocultural influences that affect them. Needless to say, this has led to many valuable experimental results, yet it has also often led psychologists to ignore sociocultural data that are crucial to achieving a more comprehensive science of the mind. Psychological trauma, for example, can have both individual and collective aspects. Someone who receives life-threatening injuries in an isolated accident or attack may be traumatized in a way that is primarily private or individual.

On the other hand, some trauma is essentially collective in nature. The Holocaust is often cited as an instance in which people were traumatized, not primarily as individuals, but as group members. For Holocaust survivors, issues of history, culture, religion, race, and politics have a central bearing on their traumatic experiences. There is something fundamentally different (beyond severity or “dose”) about the individual trauma experienced by survivors of shark attacks as compared with the collective trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors.

Making clear and accurate distinctions between individual versus collective trauma raises subtle issues of definition and methodology. But rather than discussing such issues at length, Kellermann simply states that "the expressed goal of sociodrama is to explore social events and community patterns that transcend particular individuals" (p. 17). Although a precise definition of collective trauma remains elusive, Kellermann provides many illustrations from his three decades of clinical experience, including his work with Holocaust survivors (Kellermann, 2001; see also http://www.amcha.org/indexEn.htm). Other examples that Kellermann cites (based on his clinical experience) include the suffering caused prior to 1992 by oppressive communist governments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, as well as other collective traumas, including

> the earthquakes in Turkey, the tensions between North and South Korea, the apartheid regime in South Africa, the nuclear bombs in Japan during the Second World War, the racial prejudices in the U.S., the Peninsular War in Spain and Portugal,… and the wars in Cyprus and in Israel. (p. 36)

Collective trauma, then, affects social groups not only through war and genocide but also through natural disasters, institutionalized racism, acts of terrorism, and other forms of collective suffering. In several chapters, Kellermann addresses selected types of collective trauma, pointing out some of their unique characteristics and describing some implications for adapting appropriate sociodrama therapeutic techniques.

## Sociodrama Techniques

Kellermann has prior publications on topics related to psychodrama and individual trauma (e.g., Kellermann & Hudgins, 2000), and so the current volume presupposes some familiarity with techniques of psychodrama such as "role reversal, doubling, mirroring, soliloquy, and concretization" (p. 23). This is not a beginner's text—some awareness of the terminology of psychodrama and of Jacob Moreno's research on sociometry and sociatry (i.e., assessing and ameliorating social connections and problems) is presupposed (Moreno, 1972; see also http://www.asgpp.org/).

But Kellermann provides a succinct statement of the goal of sociodrama—"to provide practice in solving problems of human relations through action while uncovering the commonalities among people, thus allowing the thoughts, feelings, and hopes of all participants to rise to the surface" (pp. 17–18). This is extraordinary, in part because the goal relates to "solving problems of human relations." We have seen the broad scope that this entails, dealing with the effects of problems ranging from racism to war to natural disaster. Many psychologists will find it troubling that it is difficult to quantify and measure problems like these. Nor do these problems resemble discrete illnesses for which readily identifiable cures are forthcoming.

Yet the reality and importance of problems like these cannot be doubted, especially by those who have directly witnessed or experienced the collective trauma associated with them. And, if it is hard to imagine precisely what the "cure" for the trauma associated with racism and war might look like, it is equally hard to imagine that psychologists should therefore ignore these problems. If Kellermann is correct in arguing that sociodrama can mitigate the suffering associated with these kinds of problems, then surely the technique is valuable, even if it is difficult to quantify its effects.

Like psychodrama, sociodrama is action oriented—its goal is “to provide practice in solving problems of human relations through action.” But because the problems at stake are collective in nature, the action-oriented aspect of this technique is fraught with potential complications. Take, for example, Kellermann's suggestion that sociodrama can be an “alternative or complementary method for… postwar healing and reconciliation activities” (p. 147). Is it possible for former wartime enemies to be brought together and reconciled? Kellermann suggests following a five-step process, in which the first step involves finding an outlet for “pent-up emotions within a very safe, homogeneous group environment” (p. 147). On the other hand, Kellermann does cite empirical research that raises questions about whether releasing “pent-up emotions” is likely to be beneficial to participants, or at least to all participants—see
page 129.

The second step (also taking place within a “safe, homogeneous group environment”) involves having participants “face their various internalized prejudices seriously and explore them in depth to determine if these really hold up to reality” (p. 147). This step resembles some techniques that have been widely used in group therapy (both psychodynamic and cognitive), and clinical research suggests that this approach is likely to be beneficial to participants. In this case, of course, the role of the group leader is especially complex because of the need to be well informed about the sociopolitical and ethnocultural issues at stake and also to be able to transcend personal prejudices and preconceptions.

In the third step, “participants are slowly and sensitively introduced to their former enemies and urged to discuss their complicated relations openly to find a suitable balance between status quo and reconciliation/forgiveness” (p. 147). Kellermann recognizes that this step is likely to be the most problematic of the five because of potentially explosive postconflict tensions. However, drawing on Moreno's (1972) concept of the “encounter group,” as well as the experience of several truth and reconciliation commissions (see www.usip.org/library/truth.html), Kellermann proposes ways that these meetings can be managed productively.

The final two steps in this process of postwar healing are community reconciliation and peace-making rituals. Community reconciliation comprises peace settlements, postwar justice proceedings, and commemoration ceremonies. Again, Kellermann cites not only the work of psychologists but also the work of internationally recognized peace agreements (see www.usip.org/library/pa.html). Regarding peace-making rituals, culturally specific practices can be especially powerful. For example, Kellermann cites a ritual called ho'oponopono, a technique that I have seen lead to positive results in my past clinical work with military veterans in Hawaii (cf. Daniels, n.d., p. 9). At their best, rituals like these can be beneficial, but (as Kellermann recognizes), if not managed properly, there is also a chance that they can be harmful (see Abadian, 2006). This is an argument for the proper use of effective techniques, which is what Kellermann and fellow proponents of sociodrama are seeking to develop.

**Discussion**

This is a fascinating and inspiring book, motivated by a powerful vision of sociodrama as a tool with the potential to be a “counterforce to the threat of isolation and alienation, as well as conflict and intergroup tension” (p. 167). Of course, it is also a book with flaws, which in

part reflect the relative newness of this approach. As Kellermann says: “After half a century of sociodrama, only now are we coming into our stride. At last, we are taking ourselves seriously, trying to document our work, and setting standards for training and practice” (p. 163). Readers hoping to find in this book a summary of relevant empirical research demonstrating the effectiveness of specific sociodrama techniques will be disappointed. As mentioned earlier, even a precise definition of what effectiveness means in this context is not entirely clear, let alone a means to quantify it.

Sociodrama is no panacea, and Kellermann is no utopian. In fact, Kellermann criticizes Moreno for “formulating the goal of sociodrama in such exaggerated terms as human survival,” and he proposes instead that this technique should be viewed as “one of many activities that may help prepare for conflict resolution[,]… helping large groups of people work through their collective trauma so that, when the time is ripe, they may approach the struggles of human coexistence with more awareness” (p. 65). Whether sociodrama will help to achieve even this more modest goal remains uncertain, but there is no doubt that this book helps to identify and clarify the kinds of social ills that need to be addressed and the kinds of sociodrama techniques that may prove to be useful in addressing them.

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