



Sociodrama and collective trauma, by Peter Felix Kellermann. London and Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007, 191 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-843-10446-9

We are driving through the dry and warm countryside of Castile and Leon in Spain. As we pass the semi-abandoned villages with the church bells tolling and cats sleeping in the sun in front of old stone-walled houses, the conversation addresses the collective historical memory of the civil war. It fuels a discussion on the symbolic value of the presence of memorials for the Nationalists and the absence of similar memorials for the Loyalists, who lost their life on the battlefield – or for the civilians that were killed in their houses, at the market place or in the fields. The discussion focuses on how the historical memory of the civil war is still present in the society, in the local communities and in the mind of many people. It even informs one's preference of music and dances as these are still seen as conveying the values of the opponent parties.

In a hot, humid night full of sounds, smells and colours of the ubiquitous and never sleeping life passing through, we sat in a small restaurant in Guadalajara. A small band played canciones de la revolution – songs of the revolution. One of the people at the table said: 'my grandfather fought with Villa Pancho in the revolution'. Everybody became silent for a short period of time and looked at her with curiosity and admiration. The historical context positioned her in a particular light of a longing for social justice and civil rights.

We all know how historical events have a profound impact on us. Man-made and natural disasters have impacted on all of us, in various levels and with different impact. The recent wars, genocides, other forms of organised violence, oppression, acts of racism, terrorist attacks, industrial disasters, ferry boat wrecks, pandemics and poverty have an impact on us. They become part of our understanding of the world and our identity as we relate ourselves to these incidents as part of our collective and individual history. And we perceive others, understand them, interpret their narratives and behaviour, and act in relation to them, in ways that are informed by our

understanding of these incidents. This understanding is not entirely individual but is constructed by collective narratives and understandings mediated by literature, memorials, the media, films, and shared memories in local communities, families and institutions.

Some people may be traumatised from their personal exposure to the historical events and response with symptoms of distress as well as with a different view of life, vulnerability and values. Others will be impacted through stories, secondary exposure through the media or from growing up in families with traumatised members. Intergenerational transmission of trauma can sustain distress, anger and grief.

In the book *Sociodrama and Collective Trauma*, Peter Felix Kellermann addresses these collective traumas, as disasters impact on the life of many people. Kellermann cites Verzberger (1997, p. 864):

Collective political trauma is a shattering, often violent event that affects a community of people (rather than a single person or a few members of it), and that results from human behaviour that is politically motivated and has political consequences. Such an event injures in one sharp stab, penetrating all psychological defensive barriers of participants and observers, allowing no space for denial mechanisms and thus leaving those affected with an acute sense of vulnerability.

The book covers how sociodrama, as a method, can be applied for ameliorating various types of collective trauma. Sociodrama is defined as an experiential group-as-a-whole procedure for social exploration and intergroup conflict transformation. This definition implies that sociodrama, in contrast to psychodrama, which focuses on individual dynamics, deals with intergroup relations and collective ideologies. It is a group method in which common experiences are shared in action. Kellermann cites Moreno (1972, p. 325):



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As soon as the individuals are treated as collective representations of community roles and role relations and not as to their private roles and role relations, the psychodrama turns into a 'socio-psychodrama' or short sociodrama.

There are five applications of sociodrama: *Crisis sociodrama* deals with collective trauma and group responses to disasters; *political sociodrama* deals with social problems related to power and equality; *diversity sociodrama* deals with conflicts based on stereotypes, prejudice, racism, intolerance, stigmatisation, or other negative bias against people because of their diversity; *sociodrama for conflict management* deals with the promotion of non-violent ways of managing conflict; and *post-conflict sociodrama* deals with reconciliation and community rehabilitation.

Peter Felix Kellermann argues that sociodrama is a means of promoting human understanding and non-violent solutions to intergroup tensions. The goal of sociodrama is to contribute to conflict resolution by bringing a large group of people together and opening up new channels of communication between them. Sociodrama holds the potential for supporting large groups of people working through their collective trauma so that they may approach the challenges of human coexistence with more awareness and more skills of non-violent conflict resolution. Sociodrama may help people to participate in the struggle for finding political solutions to prejudice and international conflicts without being too enmeshed in previous dominant, socially distributed, thoughts and emotions of anger, resentment and fear.

The text provides an inspiring – and sometimes creatively provocative – essay on the possible use of sociodrama as a means for ameliorating collective drama and for reconciliation, recognition of diversity and promoting humans rights as shared values. The text is definitively an essay. There is no ambition of

providing a research informed or even evidence-based account. Instead, the ambition is to present sociodrama from a personal perspective, based on extensive experience with sociodrama for various groups. It provides practitioners with useful information on a variety of settings and types of sociodrama. It is indeed a rich and committed book, conveying the deeply felt responsibility of the author to confront prejudices, inhumanity and ideologies promoting violations of human rights and human dignity.

The sociodrama approach offers a practical input to methods applicable for psychosocial programmes. As there is a growing basis of solid research on the effect and outcome of crisis intervention, treatment of traumatic stress, and psychosocial support, this should be reflected in the future development of sociodrama. It should also be informed by the research on outcome of psychosocial programmes in the wake of disaster. Furthermore, the sociodrama as a practical approach to trauma in large groups could be strengthened by the extensive research on vulnerability and protective factors in the development or prevention of traumatic stress, resilience and potential post-traumatic growth.

But still we must learn from the wisdom of the people active on the ground. In the Good Friday Agreement, it is stated in article 2 (cited from p. 143):

We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and to the protection of the human rights of all.

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