Sociodrama and collective trauma
Peter Felix Kellermann, 2006

Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to reflect on the application of group analytic and sociodramatic group-as-a-whole processes and to exemplify some of the applications of sociodrama with collective trauma and for conflict management around the world today.

The year 2005 was a very difficult year for many; natural disasters and tragedy affected many people throughout the world. Sociodrama has increasingly been applied to assist the survivors of such disasters and to explore some of the intergroup conflicts that exist around the world. Perhaps the time has come to widen its use?

Bradshaw-Tauvon (2001) reflected on the use of sociodrama for peace building within local, regional and international conferences in the UK, Sweden and Israel. She wrote that these settings provide a marvelous forum to bring together diverse cultures for the exploration of social issues and described how sociodrama can be used to nurture genuine encounters between individuals and small groups and to create ways to effect constructive change in and between societies, cultures and countries. In an example from Norway (Lillian Borge), she recounted a sociodrama that focused on war and the pain, sorrow and guilt experienced by young men who participate in war. After exploring the various issues and processes involved in major violent conflicts, the group came to the tragic conclusion that it was impossible, at this time, to build a bridge between the conflicting parties, since one side of the conflict refused to cooperate. Lillian Borge, quoted in Bradshaw-Tauvon said: "The sorrow concerned not being able to reach across gaps, sorrow about having to accept how difficult building bridges is, whether it is a question of global politics or psychotherapeutic methods" (p. 25).

Such peace-promoting activities have become a common and returning theme in many congresses of the IAGP during the last few decades. For example, there was an ongoing large group with about 150 participants, led by Marcia Karp who was using sociodrama and Theresa Howard who used group analysis during the 14th IAGP congress in Jerusalem in August 2000 ("*From Conflict to Generative Dialogue*").

During this conference, a symbolic wall was depicted in various group sessions. It appeared in the words and associations of participants during large group sessions and during the various workshops conducted before and during the congress. The wall evoked strong emotions and seemed to concretize the various interpersonal tensions between the various subgroups that were present. In addition to its symbolic significance, it had been introduced by the program planning committee who had intentionally kept the two daily large group sessions apart from one another, by a closed (but mobile) wall, so that there was never an open setting in which the entire group of participants could interact. Perhaps they conceived this separation of groups as a practical and viable solution to the inter-group tensions that appeared. Bradshaw-Tauvon (2001), who was present during the dramatization of this wall in one of the groups, described the responses of the group:

"For some it is relief, for others a frustration. It is related to as inevitable, necessary, an obstacle, as representative of inner walls. The wall in the large group for many is experienced as a barrier, even if for many it is a protection. At first the wall is built of men and women, but the men quickly leave. Later it becomes a protective surrounding wall with a man in the center. The changing images are very strong and do much to elucidate the processes in this group which contains people from 38 different countries, Armenians, Christians, Moslems, Jews, non-believers, various professionals, the categories that divide us are too many to mention. What unites us is the struggle to communicate authentically in a larger setting on a human, socio-political level and the struggle to accept each other with all our differences where every voice and action is important" (p. 27).

As a permanent resident of Jerusalem, and a citizen of Israel, I felt that creating and maintaining this artificial barrier between the two large groups was very destructive. In fact, I felt that it was a blow in the face to anyone who had hitherto believed in the power of dialogue to resolve conflicts. Despite my repeated outrage and protests in both large group sessions, there seemed to be little understanding for my point of view at that time.

About a month later, the recent Intifada started in Israel and it has since then resulted in thousands of innocent victims on both sides of the conflict.

After scores of suicide bombings and daily terrorist attacks against its civilians, Israel's unity government decided to construct a security fence between Israel and the West Bank to prevent Palestinian terrorists from infiltrating into Israeli population centers. The project has had the overwhelming support of the Israeli public, which sees the barrier as vital to their security. The same separation wall is perceived by the Palestinians as a 'land grab,' a prison wall and an 'act of racism'.

I do not understand the full significance of the above events and do not want to imply that the IAGP congress caused the recent Intifada. Despite the fact that a war also broke out in the former Yugoslavia a few years after the IAGP congress in Zagreb (1986), there must certainly be enough other reasons for such military tensions, without the infighting of a few group psychotherapists. What I want to emphasize is only the connection between the symbolic manifestation of a wall within the groups, and the actual historic building of a security fence in the country in which the groups met. Apparently, the groups were a true reflection (or a micro-cosmos) of the society in which they occurred. And as such, they conveyed profound wisdom. Because if we become aware of such messages, we might be able to facilitate change that goes beyond the intra-psychic and interpersonal disturbances of our clients and affect inter-group tensions on a global scale.

This is one of the 'humble' goals of sociodrama.

The purpose of the present paper is to describe some of my thoughts and experiences with sociodrama and to exemplify some of its applications around the world. See Moreno (1943) and Kellermann (1998) for a full description of the theory and practice of sociodrama.

My first book, 'Focus on Psychodrama' (1992), presented a systematic analysis of the essential therapeutic aspects of psychodrama. The second book, 'Psychodrama with Trauma Survivors' (2000), edited together with Kate Hudgins, described the use of psychodrama with survivors of torture, war-related trauma, bereavement, addiction and sexual abuse. Then I wrote a series of papers that dealt with the long-term effects of Holocaust trauma and the transmission upon the second generation. These papers were based on my clinical and research experience from working as a clinical psychologist in a treatment centre for Holocaust survivors and their children. As a natural continuation of this work, I am presently writing a book on sociodrama and collective trauma. By emphasizing the psychological aspects of social, political and cultural determinants of human behaviour, this book will provide a perspective that is not only therapeutic, but also socio-political and perhaps preventive. In other words, rather than only continuing to provide psychotherapy to individual trauma survivors, I try to understand how these events occurred and describe the theories and tools that might assist larger groups of people to work through their collective traumatic experiences with the help of sociodrama. This work has evolved from my experiences in groups from various parts of the world, and in Israel.

In such groups, I see ghosts and shadows of the past everywhere. What I see is not only individuals who struggle with their individual problems, but I see them as a part of groups who have suffered collective trauma. Sediments of collective suffering have been stored in everybody.

Like a nuclear bomb that disperses its radioactive fallout in distant places, even a long time after the actual explosion, any major psychological trauma continues to contaminate those who were exposed to it in one way or another. And similar to radioactivity, the emotional trauma in itself cannot be seen and it cannot be detected easily. People will instead try to bury it in the dark cellars of the unconscious as if it was as dangerous as the radioactive substances that lay buried under tons of concrete that was poured over the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl. And while the degree of contagion may diminish over time, there will always remain a trace of the blast, imprinted upon the molested space. Thus, while on the surface things may look quite normal,

the very absence of something that was there before – the void or empty space -- will have a traumatic effect on anyone who learn about its tragic history.

Except for the entire area of Chernobyl, which is still closed off almost twenty years after the accident, examples of such 'contaminated' places include 'ground zero' in New York, traces of the former Berlin Wall, the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, and the empty shores of the Zunami Wave. All these places have left their visible or invisible scars, not only on the geography of the earth, but also on the collective consciousness of humankind. With some amount of imagination, it is still possible to hear the desperate cries for help at these places.

The effects of the communist regime and their large famine on the people in Ukraine are still apparent. Similarly, the effects of the Blitz on the British (reverberating in the recent terrorist bombing), the earthquake in Turkey, the 2nd World War on the people in Australia, the Apartheid in South Africa the nuclear bombs in Japan during World War 2, the various military tensions in Korea, Cyprus and here in Israel can be felt in every group. In my work in these countries, the historical echo has reverberated and people shared their collective grief and anguish as if the wounds remained unattended and open. In addition, we recreated the ancient division of old Italy in Torino, the tensions between North and South Korea, the racial prejudices in the US, the terrible consequences of the Peninsular War in Spain and Portugal, Stalin's communist torture of the population in Sofia in Bulgaria, the recent 'Orange revolution' in Ukraine, and the oppression by the communist regimes in Estonia and Latvia. Finally, many groups focused on the terrible long-term effects of the 2nd World War in most European countries, such as in Germany, Austria and Holland. When leading psycho- and sociodrama workshops in these countries, the sediments of such past tragedies constantly appeared.

It was as if the wars were still all around us, everywhere. Even in such a beautiful and peaceful place as the little town of *Lillehammer* in Norway, there were memories of the 2nd World War, of the Quislings, victims and bystanders. Similarly, the Finns shared their many years of famine and we clearly felt the present influence of the struggle of the ancient Swedish King - 'Gustav Vasa' - in the little town of Mora, during our recent psychodrama summer seminar there.

This work transcended simple role-playing re-enactments of historic events or the detached sympathetic acknowledgement of tragic news watched on the CNN. These were collective traumatic events that the majority of the group could relate to emotionally. We could all hear to babies cry, the sounds of warplanes, of bombs and sirens; we felt the death angst of the victims and the grief of the surviving families. What became apparent was that when we faced this history together, we also faced some deep and often untouched parts of ourselves. And in those moments we became united around the commonalities of all of humankind, regardless of cultural heritage.

Sociodrama Around the World

In the aftermath of every catastrophic event, sociodramatists may be called upon to try to assist the many people who are affected. Sociodrama has much to offer, not only to the individual survivors and to their families but also to entire communities who struggle to cope with what they have experienced.

Various forms of such sociodrama sessions have been applied to major international catastrophic events (Knepler, 1970). One of the most well known is perhaps the sociodrama with the anguished people in Argentina during the military junta and later during the Falklands War (Bustos, 1994). In England, Ken Sprague and Marcia Karp worked with people on the other side of this conflict. Other examples of sociodrama include Ella-Mae Shearon's work on the German election of right-wing extremists in 1989 (Feldhendler, 1994) and the explorations of the socio-political realities in Paraguay (Carvalho and Otero, 1994). A recent handbook on sociodrama in German was edited by Wittinger (2005) with a series of relevant applications and developments, showing that the field is still growing in scope.

The second edition of Sternberg and Garcia's (2000) book 'Sociodrama: Who's in Your Shoes?" includes several other examples of sociodrama in English-speaking countries. Accounts of some sessions conducted in Eastern Europe during the great transition are described in the German journal Psychodrama (e.g. Lobeck, 1990; Zichy, 1990) and Stein et al. (1995) writes about a sociodrama conducted during the Gulf War. Ron Wiener (1997; 2001), from the UK utilizes a sociodrama method combined with 'creative training' in various parts of the world. An exploration of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Israel, including a re-enactment of a terrorist bombing, was conducted at the International Psychodrama Conference in Jerusalem in 1996. and Roman Solotowitzki in Moscow is working and developing a sociodramatic institute that will focus on 'role reversal with the enemy.' The Kiev Psychodrama association published a series of papers on sociodrama in Ukraine and Russia (Solotowitzki, 2004). Finally, Shirley Barclay from the US combines Native American spiritual rituals with psychodrama within the principle of "Mitakuye Oyasin" (*We are all Related*) should also be mentioned.

Sociodrama is often practiced in Latin America. For example, Geisler (2005) used a combination of sociodrama and bibliodrama in Managua, on the revolution in Nicaragua. Another example is the use of the "dramatic multiplication" technique with social issues, as explained by Mascarenhas in the new book on psychodrama in Brazil, called *Sambadrama* (Figusch, 2006). In fact, Brazil has been the fertile ground for many innovative drama methods, that have a decidedly socio-political emphasis and it will be interesting to see how this is going to be presented in the upcoming IAGP congress in St. Paulo in 2006.

In fact, Marise Greeb in Sao Paulo probably organized one of the largest sociodrama events in the world on March 21, 2000. Hundreds of public sociodrama, bibliodrama and axiodrama sessions were organized on the theme of 'Citizenship and Ethics.' Adam Blatner reported that 700 psychodramatists directed in 180 locations in 96 city districts, indoors in libraries, schools and other auditoriums, and even outdoors in plazas, free and open to the public, about issues in the life of the community. An estimated 8000 citizens participated. The program lasted 2 to 3 hours. There were small and large groups, with 10 to 600 participants present at each sociodrama. Many people spoke about how powerful the experience was, both for the psychodramatists and the participants. Deep feelings of sadness were expressed, along with powerlessness, humiliation, sometimes happiness, and, at the end of the sociodramas, hope for better times. The Mayor of Sao Paulo, *Marta Suplicy*, who supported this project, and apparently has had some psychodrama training herself, participated in one of the scenes, taking the role of a victim of violence.

The late Ken Sprague from the United Kingdom was a true sociodramatist and a (non-violent) revolutionary. From his own life history he had a deep understanding of how society works and he was devoted to change whenever he saw that there was some injustice done. He argued for a method that was based upon the active involvement of people, not upon political institutions and controlling power. His untimely death was a big loss for our community. I loved his earnest and straightforward manner and it was always obvious how much he cared about making the world a better place to live. I think that his paper with the title "Permission to interact: a who, how and why of sociodrama", published in the 'The Handbook of Psychodrama' is one of the finest texts on sociodrama that I know about. In this paper, Sprague (1998) writes:

> "Our primary task is not to save the rainforests or stop fox hunting, although we may support such campaigns. Nor is it to preserve the birds and their breeding grounds, although these might be ideal themes for sociodramas. Our aim is to save our humanity, which is essential at this stage of evolution if all our other efforts are to succeed (p. 252)."

Last, but not least, I would like to mention the extraordinary important work of Monica Zuretti from Argentina. Her work during many decades has made a deep impact on thousands of people around the world and in many cultural settings. For example, in the slum of Villa Miseria, she worked with a group of mothers, some of whom were of native origin, belonging to the tribes of La Pampa. These people live according to a matriarchal social structure and base their lives on their relationship with 'Mother Earth' (Pacha Mama). Perhaps she is correct in insisting that sociodrama and psychodrama cannot really be differentiated, and she has therefore developed a special combination method of 'socio-psychodrama' in which both the collective and the private must be emphasized during the group process. Zuretti (2001) writes:

> 'Sometimes the resolution of a sociodramatic scene could not be reached until, in the same group or in another, a protagonist incarnated the problem, worked on it, and gave the social matrix the possibility of change. Also, there was sometimes no possibility of understanding a personal situation, until it was related to the social environment" (P. 111). Thus, in her groups, she works with the personal histories of its members, as much as the relationships between those personal histories and the history and traumatic scenes of the social matrix. As the group develops, group members start to understand how their personal drama is also a part of the drama of humankind. In simple words, for Zuretti, everything is connected to everything else, although we do not always understand, immediately how this connection is manifested.

This work is developing in new directions, integrating findings from a variety of new sources. For example, *Monica Westberg* at the Swedish Psychodrama Academy is planning a sociodrama workshop with *Johan Galtung* and *Monica Zuretti* on peace building in the summer of 2006.

In her paper on 'The Psychodrama of Mankind – Is it really utopian?' Rosa Cukier (2000) from Sao Paulo, Brazil, was not only impressed by the breath and depth of the various international applications of sociodrama, but by the sheer enthusiasm and profound courage of the practitioners to undertake such an enormous task. It seemed to her that many practitioners have been deeply influenced by Moreno's (1953) grandiose credo that "A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind." She felt that Moreno's pretension to treat the whole of mankind always seemed exaggerated and improbable to her, but after having observed the important work done in various parts of the world, she concluded that psychodramatists seem to have the daring that it takes to push this social project forward.

Indeed, today there are practitioners all over the world who are dedicated to this universal agenda, and in a way, it has united the global psychodramatic family in a common purpose, beyond the practice of protagonist-centered psychodrama. Whatever words or language we use to describe it, such a purpose would include assisting various groups of people with their collective trauma, to promote justice and equality, and to develop avenues for friendly co-existence.

Postscript: The Wall of Separation

The Berlin Wall has been thorn down and the racial segregation system of Apartheid in South Africa has been dissolved. In other parts of the world, however, new walls are being built to separate people from one another because they cannot live together in peace. The recent security wall in Israel is such an example. It has indeed provided a sense of security for the Israeli population, while it has created frustration for the Palestinian people. But the wall might become the first step towards a solution to the Middle East conflict since more and more people, including myself, believe in the solution of "two states for two peoples" formula. While it may not be the ultimate solution, it seems to be the only one that has a chance to succeed now.

This solution is built on the not-so-familiar sociometric concept of the 'saturation point.' Moreno (1953, p. 560) suggested this concept to explain the cause of inter-group conflicts. According to him, it is the 'size of the minority group which the majority group can absorb without producing social tension and wars between the two. In simple terms; too much diversity makes for social tension. The solution (of all inter-group conflicts) could thus be to have more or less segregated societies. Or, in opposite terms, there has to be sufficient commonality and homogeneity in a group for it to develop cohesion, which of course is the basic prerequisite for any 'working group' as we have learned from the vast literature on small group research.

Common sense, you might say. But it has profound consequences for the world we live in and the groups we attend. We seem to be able to tolerate only a certain amount of divergence in the groups, which we choose to join. When the saturation point is exceeded, we can expect some kind of implosion or explosion. So, at this time of human relations evolution, we seem to have to live with the second best.

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