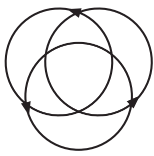

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Deeper roots of psychodrama

Las raíces más profundas del psicodrama

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ABSTRACT

While researching Moreno's early history and psychodrama, I uncovered some relatively unknown information on deeper roots of his creations, specifically taking a closer look into the question whether psychodrama followed the theories and practice of psychoanalysis, and an examination of other sources of influence on the development of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy. This article focuses on those questions and on some philosophical, religious and mystical underpinnings drawn from Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), and Hasidic teaching. This is not a complete biographical presentation. It highlights significant activities during Moreno's early years in Vienna, Austria, and then in the United States of America. Juxtaposition of ideas and theories with Moreno's biography will not necessarily be in chronical order.

Keywords: Psychodrama; Sociometry; Group psychotherapy; Spontaneity; Creativity.

RESUMEN

Mientras investigaba la historia temprana de Moreno y el psicodrama, descubrí alguna información relativamente desconocida sobre las raíces más profundas de sus creaciones, concretamente profundizando en la cuestión de si el psicodrama seguía las teorías y la práctica del psicoanálisis, y un examen de otras fuentes de influencia en el desarrollo del psicodrama, la sociometría y la psicoterapia de grupo. Este artículo se centra en esas cuestiones y en algunos fundamentos filosóficos, religiosos y místicos extraídos del misticismo judío (Cábala) y de la enseñanza jasídica. No se trata de una presentación biográfica completa. Destaca actividades significativas durante los primeros años de Moreno en Viena, Austria, y luego en los Estados Unidos de América. La yuxtaposición de ideas y teorías con la biografía de Moreno no seguirá necesariamente un orden cronológico.

Palabras clave: Psicodrama; Sociometría; Psicoterapia de grupo; Espontaneidad; Creatividad.

The value of experience and action

The evolution of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy is inextricably linked to the history of the creator, Jacob Levy Moreno (1889–1974). It does not follow the more common pattern of studying with earlier mentors, and later applying what has been learned to one's work with people. From an early age, Moreno assumed the role of a leader in his family of origin and with his contemporaries (Blatner, 1988; Marineau, 2014). Charting his path, he was convinced that action was more important than words, experience a better teacher than books. Martin Buber, the philosopher mostly associated with the I-Thou ideas, published one article in Moreno's Daimon journals. For Buber (1958), too, experience was a meta-lingual phenomenon, and, thus, language was considered inferior to pure experience.

Moreno was an auto-didact who already in adolescence began intensive reading of philosophy, the Bible, and many religious scriptures, both Christian and Jewish, including the mystical Jewish tradition, the Kabbalah (Moreno, 1989).

Prior to studying at Vienna University

Starting in 1908, observing children at play in Augarten Park in Vienna, Austria, Moreno was fascinated by their creativity and freedom of expression. Watching closely, he also noted the positive emotional effects on those engaged in enacting their fantasies, emotions and concerns. He would then tell them stories and have them play various roles. This led to future experimentation in improvisation techniques, involving the children and, at times, their parents.

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Later, he created the Theatre of Spontaneity, which was open to the community. Thinking that an essential pre-courser to creativity is spontaneity, Moreno created many techniques to help people become more spontaneous. Creativity, fueled by spontaneity, was viewed as a vital force, not just for its mere artistic value, but necessary for human survival. It is also a factor that determines the quality of life and well-being of humankind. In psychodrama, creating and enacting dramas that were neither scripted nor rehearsed were viewed both as artistic and therapeutic.

Beyond the enjoyment in play-acting, Moreno also noticed that the children had an innate ability to resolve conflicts among themselves. If a fight broke out, they were able to make up and continue meeting and interacting as friends. The questions that arose were twofold: what do children have that enables them to more freely express themselves, and how can adults regain these qualities? Meeting the children and their parents in a public park was a spontaneous decision on Moreno's part, as this was the setting in which they would congregate and play. At age 19, he continued to reflect about earlier experiences when he played God with other children, when he was 4 years old. At that time, the other children played angels. When he attempted to ascend on a pile of chairs, he fell to the floor and broke his arm. In both of these incidents, action was first, and contemplation came later.

First student years

In 1909, when Moreno entered the University of Vienna, he sought to study theology, philosophy and had a keen interest in theater and metaphysics. There, thinking of work in action and of being of service to his community, he met a fellow student named Chaim Kellmer, with whom he established the House of Encounter. Kellmer, described as Moreno's opposite, was also Jewish, but,

> [...] raised in the Hasidim tradition, he was studying philosophy in the hope of finding answers to existential questions, but regular meditations just led to further questions: he [Kellmer] was not basically attracted by action. On the other hand, the young Moreno was not only to preach action, but was to say that nothing was worth discussing before it was put to a test: his life was a testimony of his beliefs (Marineau, 2014, p. 33).

During that year, Moreno began to write and publish, and, although he valued action, he became a prolific writer and an editor of several journals. The article "Invitation to Encounter" was inspired by his many conversations with Chaim Kellmer and others in the intellectual community in Vienna's golden age. It sought to emphasize the importance of encounters with others, to have meaningful and authentic conversations and to deeply consider their viewpoints.

The House of Encounter was created to help refugees and poor people, giving them shelter, food, and other services. Everyone was welcome. Such services, which are nowadays run by governmental social agencies in many cities, were non-existent in Vienna at that time.

Scott Giacomucci (2021) equates the House of Encounter to the Settlement House, founded by Jane Adams, the social work pioneer in New York, United States of America (Bailey, 2006). Quoting Marineau (2014) and Nolte (2014), he writes:

> The House of Encounter provided free support, help completing official applications, job assistance, and legal help for refugees and immigrants flooding into Europe. In the evenings at the House of Encounter, everyone gathered for a community ritual discussing the events, concerns, and problems of the day. Moreno describes these mutual aid meetings as the first encounter groups and a "theater of everyday life. (Giacomucci, 2021, p. 36).

Thinking about I – Thou connections and their relevance to human development appears to have been infused with religious thoughts, rather than the psychoanalysis, which zeroed in on the individual. Moreno and Kellmer grew their beards untrimmed, wore long coats and maintained anonymity at the House of Encounter; all these were elements and symbols of a non-specific religion.

Religion as an inspiration

Moreno had a life-long fascination with religions. His parents were Sephardic Jews, who were not religious. His mother, Paulina Iancu, received her education in catholic schools and his father, Moreno Nissim Levi, did not maintain a strict

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religious home. Born in Bucharest, Romania, across from their home there was a Greek orthodox church, which fascinated the young Jacob Levy. The church ceremonies and processions captured the boy's imagination. After moving to Vienna, when he was 5 years old, they settled in the second district, among other Sephardic Jews.

During his teenage years, the young Moreno read many books about religions, not only Jewish or Christian. As a student, co-creating the House of Encounter, his ambitions were far broader, as cited in Jonathan Fox's (1987) book *The Essential Moreno*:

> I had the *idee fix* that a single individual had no authority, that he must be the voice of the group. It must be a group; the new word must come from a group. Therefore, I went out to find friends, followers, good people. My new religion was a religion of being, of self-perfection. It was a religion of helping and healing, for helping was more important than talking. It was a religion of silence. It was a religion of doing a thing for its own sake, unrewarded, unrecognized. It was a religion of anonymity (Fox, 1987, p. 205).

Introducing philosophical, metaphysical, and even religious ideas into discussions about psychotherapy was revolutionary. At a time when efforts by others were geared toward the scientific, Moreno followed his own path. He avidly studied other religions, and similarly the works of many philosophers, from Socrates and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. In his formulations about religions, he sought to embrace all of them. The concept of God evolved and had several permutations. Like Nikos Kazantzakis (1960) in his book *The Saviors of God*, Moreno viewed God as passionate and contemplative, not as an omnipotent authority above all humans. Rather, Moreno thought of God as representing a unifying force that requires our active participation in efforts to create greater harmony. This was in line with Buber's (1958) I – Thou philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal connections and in which human beings are responsible for their own creation, together with the god creator. He further envisioned his wish that people would recognize the divine nature in themselves, and, as they encounter with others, they would be able to co-create. Lindqvist (1994) views the relevance of religion to psychodrama on three levels: the metaphysical, the moral commitment to work with people, and the psychodrama as a means to deal with religious/metaphysical issues.

In his *Words of the father*, Moreno (1920) posits that spontaneity and creativity are, in essence, the "Godhead" in psychodrama. There, he argues that each person has a god in himself, who can be enlisted to guide him toward a life of creativity and healing. Co-creation with God also means that each person is responsible for what he or she creates in his/her own life and in the world. In the introduction to his book *Impromptu Man*, Jonathan Moreno (2014) quotes his father: "God is spontaneity. Hence: Be spontaneous!". This exclamation places psychodrama at the intersection with religion and spirituality. If God is spontaneity, which fuels creativity, it arguably enables human beings to co-create, and that power is infinite, as stated in the Kabbalah.

Human spontaneity is limited to our lifetime, but we can warm up to continuously create, even beyond what is presented to us as a cultural conserve. A perpetual creation is shown in the canon of creativity. In this model, psychodrama plays a distinctive role: helping people to warm up, becoming more spontaneous and creative. And as we do it in role play in action, inevitably psychodrama engenders playfulness, catharsis, and joy. This is what Hasidic teaching also encourages its practitioners to do, dance as you pray, allow the spirit to rise with excitement.

Entering medical school

In 1911, moving on to study medicine, Moreno met Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis. From the outset, he challenged Freud, as psychoanalysis was gaining recognition internationally. Moreno recounts one encounter with Freud:

> While working at the psychiatric clinic of Vienna University, I attended one of Sigmund Freud lectures of a telepathic dream. As the students filed out, he asked me what I was doing. I responded: "well, Dr. Freud, I start where you leave off. You meet people in the artificial setting of your office. I meet them on the streets and in their homes in their natural surroundings. You analyze their dreams; I try to give them the courage to dream again. I teach them to play God" (Moreno, 1946, p. 5-6).

Another area in which Moreno continued to develop his ideas, reflective of his originality as an independent thinker, creator and activist, was with prostitutes. In 1912 he was approached by a woman at the red-light district. As they talked, a policeman came in between them and whisked her away to the police station. Moreno followed them and, when she

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came out, she told him that the policeman threatened her not to wear seductive clothes at daylight to attract customers. This was a common occurrence in Victorian-era Vienna against prostitutes. Appalled by their living conditions, humiliation and harassment by the police, Moreno initiated what may be defined nowadays as a community organization and self-help groups. Along with a physician specializing in venereal diseases, and a newspaper reporter, he visited their homes "not to reform the girls or analyze them, but rather to return them to some dignity" (Moreno, 1946). He felt driven to help them, he wrote, "because the prostitutes had been stigmatized for so long as despicable sinners and unworthy people… they had come to accept this as an unalterable fact" (Moreno, 1946).

As the initial meetings with their group focused on concrete problems such as lack of medical care, Moreno discovered the healing power of group sharing, noticing that they were feeling less isolated, more identified with each other and empowered to seek medical treatment when needed. Again, working with people in their homes and social context seemed to respond to their own needs, and contrary to the predominant approach at that time.

First experimentation with sociometry and open sessions

In 1915, as an advanced medical student, and later as a doctor, Moreno started working with large groups of WW1 refugees at the Mitterndorf camp, outside of Vienna. There, he experimented what later became known as sociometry. These refugees were uprooted from their homes in South Tyrol after the invasion of the Italian army. Problems erupted in their camps, housing thousands of people, where no attention has been given to religions, social status or lifestyles. As conflicts and fights erupted among the large groups, Moreno worked with them with the goal of creating democratic and participatory structures. He used questionnaires helping them to choose with whom they preferred to live and work. Taking into account people's choices, and helping them express their ideas and emotions, was the beginning of sociometry in action.

After graduating from medical school, Moreno worked briefly at Steinhof Hospital (Marineau, 2014) for the mentally ill. This short stint proved very disappointing; patients were treated with medication and no attention to their feelings. He felt that the primary goal of this hospital was confinement, rather than seeking ways to improve the patients' lives or work toward healing. This experience turned him further from psychiatry, as it had been taught and practiced by Freud and his disciples.

Moreno chose to work as a medical doctor and started practicing as a medical doctor at a clinic in Bad Vöslau. He emphasized the value of the patients' emotional well-being and support networks as important to their physical health. He made home visits and accepted poor patients without pay. All the while, Moreno was actively involved in the flourishing cultural life of Vienna. He congregated with writers, philosophers, and others in the arts, architecture and theater. Notable among them was the philosopher/theologian Martin Buber, who became an associate (Waldl, 2005). In 1921 Moreno inaugurated the open sessions in a public theater. This marked the beginning of public demonstrations of sociodramas, which eventually also evolved into psychodramas, open to the public (Gershoni, 2008).

Re-creating his life in the United States

In 1925, Moreno immigrated to the United States of America. A relatively unknow fact is Moreno's fascination with technology and inventions. Along with his brother-in-law Franz Lörnizo, they developed an instrument that could record and preserve music and voices. They were both invited by the General Phonograph Company in Ohio to come to the United States of America with their sound recording device. This was a pre-curser to the tape-recorder. This invention was eventually discarded by the inviting company, but it gave Moreno a reason to consider staying in the United States of America as an immigrant, hoping to find ways to develop his ideas on sociometry and psychodrama, and extend their reach. The rejection by the General Phonograph Company was because other engineers had been working on development of sound recorders. Moreno's hopes to sell his invention for a large sum were dashed, and he found himself in a dire situation: dwindling financial resources, alone in a foreign country with a limited knowledge of English and inability to practice medicine without a local license to do so.

At this juncture, after a period of time feeling desperate, Moreno applied the principles that he believed in: he took action, used his knowledge of sociometry to form connections to other professionals, and offered presentations about psychodrama and sociometry to various universities, medical centers and other institutions. Eventually, he was invited to conduct sociometric research at Sing-Sing prison and at the Hudson School for Girls. With the financial help of his

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brother William, who admired him, Moreno rented a small auditorium in Carnegie Hall and gave public demonstrations of psychodrama, attracting psychiatrists and psychologists like William Alanson White, Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir, Nathan Ackerman, and Carl Whitaker.

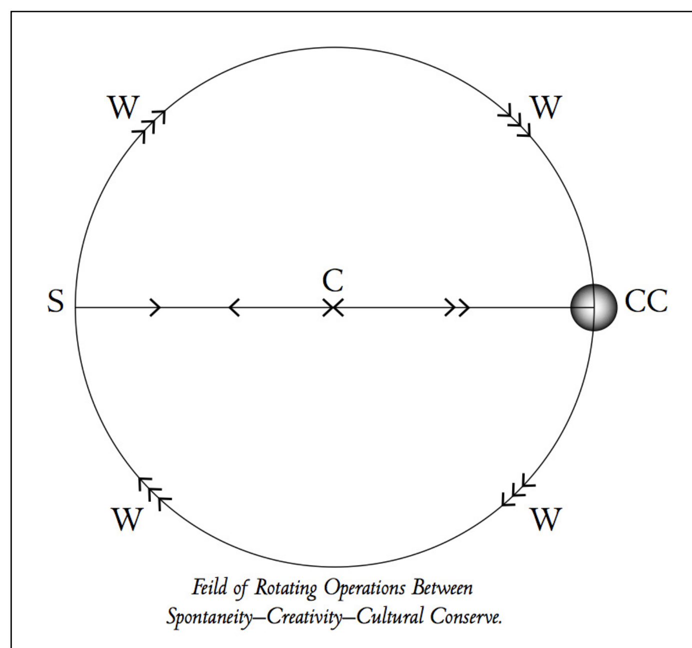
Moreno continued the theoretical work and practice on sociometry (Moreno, 1934). Serving as the scientific backbone for psychodrama, sociometry set out to measure experiential networks of connectedness through attraction, repulsion or neutrality, which are all present in social interactions. During the 1930s, he researched his ideas and explored their applications in many clinical settings and professional conferences. Challenging contemporary axioms of psychotherapy, which followed the medical models of pathology and cure, Moreno's ideas were to be co-opted decades later by family therapy theorists and practitioners as basic tenets of system theories. The change of locus of therapy means a revolution in what was always considered appropriate medical practice. Husband and wife, mother and child are treated as a conjointly, often facing one another, and not separate beings, because separate from one another they may not have any tangible mental ailment (Gershoni, 2008).

Spontaneity and creativity

During that year, Moreno (1934) published his magnum opus Who Shall Survive? It included many of his ideas and theories, including sociometry and also role theory. He viewed human beings as role players, who throughout life develop many roles. Initially, newborns and infants related through somatic roles. Later, they develop social role and psychological roles. He wrote that roles do not emerge from the self, but the self emerges from roles.

Learning and developing roles also relates to Moreno's theory about spontaneity and creativity. Creativity was defined as an adequate response to a new situation, and a new response to an old situation. Creativity, therefore, is not limited to artistic expression, but is also viewed as a vital force in life. Adhering to the principle that action predates words, Moreno also developed many techniques—also applied in psychodrama—to facilitate spontaneity and thereby help people become more creative, free of tensions or anxiety. As a healing method, psychodrama can help people develop and reach desired roles, and discard roles that are no longer needed or healthy. Work in action enables them to rehearse new roles.

The process of learning is continuous, as depicted graphically in the canon of creativity (Fig. 1): warm-up facilitates spontaneity, which leads to creativity, and onward toward creating a cultural conserve (Gershoni, 2021). A cultural conserve is a finished result of the creative effort (e.g., a book, a symphony, or and accepted social rule). Further warm up may lead to more spontaneity, higher creativity and another cultural conserve, a seemingly infinite process.



Source: Moreno (1953, p. 46).

Figure 1. The canon of creativity.

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Noticing spiritual elements in psychodrama

According to Adam Blatner (2004), who was a psychiatrist and the most prolific writer on psychodrama:

> Addressing issues regarding clients' highest values, their underlying belief systems about where they belong in the universe and what they should do with their lives, offers a particularly useful framework for healing. In addition, spiritual conflicts are frequent elements in people's broader emotional development. In fact, God, Jesus, Buddha, and other significant figures also become internalized, and they play their roles in the inner psychic system. By externalizing these dialogues, participants can be subjected to the light of consciousness and the best awareness of the present moment, rather than continuing to parrot what was taught and ingrained in childhood.
> Moreno was one of the first innovators to write and talk about the spiritual dimension of life and was in this sense a precursor to the later-emerging field of transpersonal psychology. In addition, since the 1980s, psychodramatists have paid increasing attention to clients' values and belief systems and have integrated Jungian, Asian, and Native American concepts into their practice (Blatner, 2004, p. 347).

In the last few decades, more psychodramatists focused on spirituality in psychodrama (Dayton, 1995; Kellermann, 1992; Miller, 2007; Schreiber, in press). Natalie Winters' (2000) writing about Moreno's role theory recently proposed adding the fourth category: spiritual roles (Blatner, 1999).

The Kabbalah and Hasidic movement

Kabbalah is a mysticism branch of the Jewish religion, whose core belief is that during spiritual ascension one could siphon the power animating the higher dimensions down into the material world, where it would manifest as benevolent influence of all kinds. These included spiritual enlightenment, zest in worship and other high-minded aims, but also the more prosaic health and healing.

According to Gershom Scholem (1974), the best-known scholar of the Kabbalah movement, it was originated in the years before the 16th century. Kabbalah sought to offer mystical interpretations of the Bible, often by deciphering codes, compiled in the book Zohar and other books written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Jewish Kabbalah is a set of esoteric teachings meant to explain the relationship between the unchanging, eternal God—the mysterious Ein Sof (The Infinite, in Hebrew)—and the mortal, finite universe (God's creation). It forms the foundation of mystical religious interpretations within Judaism. These ideas about perpetual and continuous creation appear similar to the description in Moreno's canon of creativity.

The Kabbalah had an influence on the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe. Both schools shared the idea that everyone has an internal divine spark, and that rituals of prayer are to be practiced with joy, aimed at elevating the soul. The emergence of the Hasidic movement followed the pogroms, which arguably contributed to an isolationist perception and a strong emphasis on charity (mitzvah, in Hebrew) and humility with each other, around the world. Like other religious revitalization movements, Hasidism was at once a call to spiritual renewal and a protest against the predominant religious establishment and culture. They tend to interpret the Torah literally and follow charismatic leaders called Rebbes. They believe that piety and devotion are more important than Torah study and religious scholarship.

The founder of the Hasidic movement was known as Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name). By 1740, he settled in Medzhibizh, Ukraine, where thousands came to hear his teachings. The Baal Shem Tov taught that every Jew, scholar and ordinary person alike, could connect with God through learning Torah and doing mitzvahs with love, joy, and simple, earnest humility, following the guidance of the Kabbalah, while being charitable was considered a virtue. Its highest, most elevated form was charity in secret, anonymously (matan beseter, in Hebrew). This parallels the anonymity which was introduced by Moreno and Kellmer in the House of Encounter.

Moreno was a Sephardic Jew whose ancestry dates to the 15th century generation of Jews, who were expelled from Spain. His family was not religious, only adhered to some rituals and holidays. Later in life, he described himself as a "citizen of the world," who was essentially secular. His interest in theology and religions had a profound effect on his ideas about humanity.

The whole of humankind

The opening lines in Moreno's book *Who Shall Survive?* (1934, p. 1):

> A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind. But no adequate therapy can be prescribed as long as mankind is not a unity in some fashion and as long as its organization remains unknown. It helped us in the beginning to think, although we had no definite proof for it, that mankind is a social and organic unity.

The first line is one of the most quoted by Moreno. It reflects his ambition from the beginning of his career to expand the reach of his ideas and lifework. It is also similar to a well-known adverb from the Jewish religious writing: whoever saves one soul is as though he saves the whole world.

By the year 1932, prior to the publication of *Who Shall Survive?*, Moreno gained recognition of his peers in the United States of America. He was invited as a discussant to one of the psychoanalytic panels, demonstrating his own knowledge of psychoanalysis, which he did not practice. At that conference of the American Psychiatric Association, Moreno announced group psychotherapy as a valid psychotherapy method. Up that day, the term did not exist.

The reaction of many of his colleagues was a blend of criticism and consternation. Questions like "How can you?," "What about patient's confidentiality?," and "what about the transference?" filled the convention auditorium. Fast forward, group analysis and psychoanalytic group psychotherapy are practiced and proliferating throughout the world nowadays.

Along with his wife, Zerka, Moreno was very active during the early 1950s and until the end of his life in promoting psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy globally (Fonseca, 1997). They reached out to many group psychotherapists in many countries and held international conferences. This culminated in founding the International Association for Group Psychotherapy (IAGP) in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1973. It later added "…and Group Processes" to the title of IAGP, thus becoming more inclusive of various methods of working with groups.

Brief conclusions

Jacob Levy Moreno did not follow the footsteps of any other professional. He was a visionary: the creator and the earliest pioneer of psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy. Joseph Pratt (1907, 1945) was a physician who worked with groups of patients diagnosed with tuberculosis at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1905. His work with them was more educational, disseminating information and guiding the patients how to care for themselves and achieve good results. His work was notable and helpful to many, but could not be considered psychotherapy. Moreno created his own theories, following action work with various population groups. He did not follow Sigmund Freud, although he read him and was well-versed in psychoanalysis. Moreno drew his inspiration from many sources: ancient healing rituals, religions, Greek philosophers, Jewish mysticism, and the theater. He would encourage others to continue and further develop what he had created.

Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

Availability of data and material

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