

# SIX STORIES ABOUT MORENOS´S LIFE AND WORK

## Psychodrama today: How we can understand the world

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### STORY N. 1

I will begin with the work that Moreno did with female juvenile delinquents (from 12 to 18 years old) from the New York State Training School for Girls (Hudson). Within the strategic selection of the population studied (505 girls), based on the results of the sociometric test, Moreno focuses in greater detail on a social unit comprised of five youths. One of them, Elsie, calls his attention due to her seriously excluded affective position. The four girls positively chosen by Elsie from her own cottage (the community was divided into 16 cottages), rejected her, as did 27 other classmates, 12 from her own cottage and 15 from outside it. Moreno studies the *motives* behind both Elsie's choices and the others involved; works to increase the *initial number of her contacts* in the community, increasing her relational possibilities; initiates the use of procedures such as *role-playing* and the *spontaneity test*, to facilitate spontaneous fluency and increase the telic coefficient of the relational network in question. It is then understood that Elsie's exclusion, as well as her transgressive behavior (lying, stealing, etc.) results not only from her intrinsic relational difficulties, but also from the way that the relational dynamic of her living group interacts with her. Elsie is systematically marginalized and neglected by the group. Knobel (2004), a Brazilian sociometrist, comments that "any attempt to 'cure' her needs to involve all the girls involved, whether directly or indirectly, with her" (p. 202). He seeks to treat the sick *social organism*. The emotional stability is function of the groupal *sociometric status* of the person. Isolated and peripheral members would be more susceptible to illness.

In the end, Elsie, excluded from Cottage 8, is able to find satisfactory inclusion in Cottage 13.

## STORY N. 2

I have chosen now one of Moreno's controversial clinical cases (1974), the "Mary Case", officially denominated *A case of paranoia*, for us to reflect upon.

During the 51 sessions, which took place over a period of ten months, Moreno treated Mary, a young woman of 23 years of age who had been ill for three years. She developed a delusion toward a man, John, whom she had supposedly seen at a Christmas party. She started searching for him obsessively on the streets. Her bizarre behavior called the attention of the police who took her to a psychiatric hospital. Mary was opposed to any kind of treatment and was transferred from hospital to hospital.

Moreno outlines a therapeutic strategy which has three phases: realization, substitution and analysis of the delusion. The family is oriented to accept the reality of her psychosis by participating in the search for John. The parents communicate that they have discovered a doctor who is a friend of John's. Mary insists that she be taken to him. Moreno expands the dramatic context to the social, announcing that there is a telegram from John to her. The telegram states that he is enrolling for the draft (the action takes place during the Second World War), but that he will meet with her in two days. William, a professional auxiliary ego, is also presented as a friend of John. There is an "exchange of correspondence between Mary and John prepared by the therapeutic staff. Moreno warns that a lay person might find this procedure a mystification, but that on the psychodramatic level it has to be understood as a therapeutic procedure, carefully prepared and directed by experienced therapists and, I would add, running a great risk. William, the auxiliary ego becomes a bridge between the patient and the center of her delusion, John. In the psychodramatic sessions, William is systematically chosen to be John. She has the possibility of being John through the role reversal technique; that is, to experience being her own delusional creation. In one dramatization Mary represents John as if he were an embryo she carries in her womb. A delivery room is set up on the psychodramatic set so she can give birth to her baby. The psychodramatic plot goes on: John is "enlisted" by the army and their meeting is always postponed. Mary's anguish increases. She hears on the radio that it is possible to perform weddings with absent military personnel through power-of-attorney. William represents John and the wedding is performed on the psychodramatic stage. Mary is a beautiful, tearful bride who is kissed by William-John. During the days that follow, her anxiety over John begins to

diminish. The wedding seems to signify the beginning of her progressive detachment from John.

Through realizing the psychosis the patient is able to experience part of their internal life which was previously incompatible with reality. The old Mary is replaced by a Mary II, but a Mary III is yet to emerge. Mary transfers her feelings to the auxiliary egos and becomes dependent on them, as it is only through them that she is able to find John and her imaginary world. Mary demonstrates a desire to extend her relationships with the people who were auxiliary egos outside the sessions. During the dramatic action, a part of William blends into John and this mixture is progressively accepted by Mary. John's mask begins to take on William's features. When she meets William outside of the therapeutic theater, he is John with William's features. The *substitution* has begun. Mary develops a greater connection to William than would be expected from a "newly-wedded" woman. She invites him on outings and to go to the movies. The relationship between Mary and William attains sufficient solidity to permit a new and daring step: the time has arrived for John to die.

His death on the front lines is announced. Mary has a crisis and remains unreachable for some time while she goes through mourning. Some sessions follow in which, through the mirror technique, she is able to see herself represented by a double. The transference world begins to be substituted, little by little, by the telic world. She begins to make the distinction between the doctors and nurses (auxiliary egos) from the real world and the roles they play in the psychodramatic scenes.

During an action in which the therapist acts along with her sisters, the truth is revealed: John never existed outside the patient's imagination. Mary jumps from the audience to the stage and tries to attack the doctor. When the aggressive impetus has passed, she asks for forgiveness and feels ready to continue the work with scenes based on the dilution of her delusions and hallucinations.

Her interest in William slowly disappears when she is released from the hospital. But the process is still not finalized. Moreno invites a young man, who felt attracted to Mary before she became ill, to participate. The final substitution of the affective project is put into action: from John to William and now from him to George. Mary marries George.

Fifteen years later Mary continues to live with her two *dramatis personae*, but they don't interfere with each other. She found a partner who completes this duality. Sometimes she talks with her fictitious characters, though if someone approaches her she interrupts her internal dialogue and explains that she has just been conversing, in thought, with someone. She negotiates the path between fantasy and reality well. This double life doesn't prevent her from performing her roles as housewife, mother (her son is named John) and wife. Her tendencies toward isolation and inadequacy, previously unhealthy, now appear normal. Questioned by Moreno about why she hasn't visited him, she replies that it isn't necessary as "you have become a part of me and I talk with you in your absence." The *psychotic I* was re-included among the other "partial I's". According to Moreno (1974):

Our goal must be to reintegrate unhealthy people and their aberrant behavior in our culture, as if everything were understandable and natural; to give them the possibility of revealing themselves in all areas of creative activity.  
(p. 352)

Moreno (1989) leaves no doubt as to having experienced this himself:

The psychodrama of my life preceded psychodrama as a method. I was the first patient of psychodramatic therapy, protagonist and director in one.  
(p.32)

And he makes no secret of the fact that if he hadn't adopted this procedure of living with his own madness, instead of hiding or analyzing it, he probably would have succumbed to mental illness:

I escaped the fate of the schizophrenic who operates in a vacuum and has to fill the void with hallucinated figures up to the point of making himself believe that these figures interact with him. (Idem, p.32)

Moreno built, therefore, a psychiatry and a psychotherapy that were very different from those that existed in his time. His daring and recklessness cost him a great deal of resistance and opposition. He doesn't put forth the colonizing attitude of imposing on others what one believes to be right. Moreno believes that in madness there is creative potential to be liberated and that, from then on, each must go his own way.

### STORY N. 3

At the beginning of World War I, Moreno is not accepted as a volunteer for military service due to his dubious nationality (Romanian, the son of a Turk), but soon after (1915), he is hired by the government to perform, in a Tyrolean refugee camp (Mittendorf), that which would become his primary pre-sociometric work. Moreno (1989) reports:

Using the methods of sociometry, albeit in a very primitive form, I moved families around on the basis of their mutual affinities for one another. Thus, the groundwork by which the community was organized was changed for the better. My theory was borne out by the fact that when the people were able to live with those to whom they were positively attracted, the families tended to be helpful to one and the signs of maladjustment diminished both in number and in intensity. (p. 66)

Moreno, however, made no secret of the fact that the emotional motive for his success in this work was his deep identification with the Tyroleans who had a double national identity. They were Austrians, yet spoke Italian as their language. They were removed from their land by the Austrian government when the Italian army advanced in their direction. Moreno knew what it was like to not have a well-defined cultural identity:

[...] I began to identify myself more and more with the Tyroleans, learning their language like a native and otherwise immersing myself in their lives. [...] (Idem, p. 65) I'll never forget the day they left for home, newly

created Italian citizens. The women and children dressed in festive garb that had been lovingly preserved despite the shortages of the war years. They marched out of the camp, four abreast, full of joy, singing their beautiful Italian songs. Part of me wanted to go with them. ... (Ibidem, p. 67)

#### STORY N. 4

In 1913, Moreno dedicates himself to the task of including the Viennese prostitutes socially and ensuring their rights as citizens. Moreno's words speak for themselves:

I had in mind what LaSalle and Marx had done for the working class, ideology aside. They made the workers respectable by giving them a sense of dignity; they organized them into labor unions, which raised the status of the entire class. [...] (1989, p. 48)

#### STORY N. 5

While still young he founds the Religion of Encounter (1908 to 1914).

[...] We were all committed to the sharing of anonymity, of loving and giving, living a direct and concrete life in the community with all we met. We left our homes and families and took to the streets. (Moreno, 1989, p. 41)

In the years before World War I, Austria experienced a period of political and economic instability which generated a great number of people arriving in Vienna in search of a better life. The objective of Moreno and his friends was to shelter them and facilitate the acquisition of their documents and work visas. After dinner he would coordinate meetings in which "problems were brought forth and grievances were settled" (Moreno, 1989, p. 42). Then they would dance and sing. "Participating in the encounters was a religious experience, a joyful one. ..." (Moreno, 1989, p. 42) This way

of celebrating is reminiscent of Hassidic rituals involving singing, dancing, and the expansion of happiness in seeking communication with a higher power.

#### STORY N. 6

Moreno recounts that he was once invited to speak to a group of theologians. After the presentation they asked: “What is the difference between the old Christian hypothesis, ‘Love your Neighbor’ and your hypothesis?” Moreno responded: “Well, we have not really improved very much on ‘Love your Neighbor’, except that we have added, ‘by means of role reversal’”. (Moreno, 1975, p.17)

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