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**Practitioner's Corner**

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## **Creativity, Migration, and Multiculturalism: A Psychodrama Perspective**

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This article deals with the often-neglected aspects of group work: Creativity and Multiculturalism. In a world where migration is ubiquitous, much research focuses on economic, social, and political ramifications of this phenomenon. Considerably less attention is given to the cultural effects of migration on the immigrants, their host communities, and countries. As group therapists, we view groups as microcosms of society at large, and the working assumption is that the group diversity contributes to its members' creativity. Central to the development of psychodrama is the emphasis on creativity, not just for its aesthetic values but also as a vital force in human life and mental health. Since the history of psychodrama is intrinsically linked to its founder, J. L. Moreno, I will trace the evolution of ideas about creativity to his own biography. The relevant milestones of Moreno's life will be noted and discussed, starting with his ancestral history.

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**KEYWORDS:** Multiculturalism; Creativity; Mental Health; Psychodrama

### **INTRODUCTION**

The impetus for writing this article emerged from reflections about my training in psychodrama in the early 1990's. I had joined an experiential psychodrama group in the previous decade, while I was practicing family therapy at a child guidance clinic. Later, I decided to dive into psychodrama more deeply and contacted Dr. Robert (Bob) Siroka, a student of J. L. Moreno, and a founder of the Sociometric Institute in New York. What awaited me was life altering. The weekly sessions, each lasting 3.5 hours, were with a large group of about 25 people, all professionals from various disciplines. The diversity within this group was astounding, as if meant to represent the characteristics of New York, one of the most multicultural cities on earth. Recent surveys count 800 languages spoken in Queens County of New York City, according to the Endangered Language Alliance (ELA) and Business Insider (2017).

This training group comprised male and female tarinees; American and foreign born; single and married; White, Black, or Latinos; gay and straight; and

religious and atheists. The most awe-inspiring factor of this group was Dr. Siroka's creativity. In my imagination, I often equated it with an ever-flowing river that does not run dry. He is unwavering with his commitment to sociometry, which serves to connect the group members to each other, and to choose protagonists. He operates in the moment, following the narrative of the group and the protagonist. In the tradition of Moreno, he has also led monthly open workshops along with his wife, Jaquie. Nothing was pre-planned, and no single session repeated itself. Bob would always devise novel interventions, directing profound and deep dramas that are still etched in my memory.

During the intervening years, I frequently wondered about creativity, and its connection to psychodrama and multiculturalism. As an immigrant, I sought to understand those connections with migration, which is at the center of multicultural experiences. My life-long curiosity about other countries, other cultures, and other languages led me to reading about the journeys of J. L. Moreno and about his life and work internationally.

### **ANCESTRAL MIGRATION AND CHILDHOOD**

The migration and multicultural history of J. L. Moreno dates back to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Spain (Sepharad, in Hebrew, is Spain). Moreno was a descendant of a Sephardic-Jewish family, whose ancestors were expelled from Spain during the reign of the Catholic kings. In 1492, Isabela de Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon issued an edict ordering all Jews to convert to Catholicism or leave the country. About 200,000 Jews left, migrating to North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Moreno's ancestors migrated eastward through Europe and settled in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Türkiye). Moreno's grandfather moved from Constantinople to Plevna (now Pleven, Bulgaria) and then to Bucharest, Romania, where J. L. Moreno was born in 1889 (Marineau, 2014, & Blatner, 1988).

When he was six years old, Moreno's family moved to Vienna. The adjustment and acculturation to different cities, countries, and population groups continued throughout Moreno's life. With these tribulations there was a continuous chain of challenges and creations, as detailed below.

The harsh economic situation in Bucharest caused the move to Vienna, where Moreno's father was offered a job that entailed traveling. While he found it difficult to adjust to the new environment and learn the German language, he never felt at home there, taking every opportunity to travel through the Balkan countries, where the spoken language among Jews was Ladino. Moreno's mother, on the contrary, learned the German language easily as the family settled in the second district of Vienna. She often took her children to a nearby park, whether to the Prater or to Augarten. As we learn, the Augarten park had a special meaning for Jacob Moreno, where he later began to develop his ideas about creativity.

"Jacob rapidly adjusted to the new surroundings. Vienna was a city that he would come to enjoy, even though he, too, always felt like a refugee among true Viennese.....Jacob, or Jacques as his mother called him, started school in Vienna. He took the habit of sitting in

the front row; in this way he could listen more easily to the teacher but also be chosen as an assistant. He kept this habit throughout his studies and rapidly became a favorite pupil because of his curiosity and intelligence; he did well at school, becoming the pride of his parents.” (Marineau, pp. 22–23)

The following years were rife with more relocations and family tribulations. The family temporarily moved to Germany, first to Berlin and later to Chemnitz. All that while there were marital issues that later led to separation and divorce. Jacob opted to return to Vienna, insisting on living on his own, supporting himself by tutoring children. He devoted much of his time to studying and reading many books on philosophy, religion, history, and general literature. This may be viewed as an adolescent rebellion and separation from his family. However, with his self-proclaimed grandiosity, he embarked on this new stage in life as an opportunity to chart his own path, to contemplate his own future and the future of humankind (Moreno, J. D. 1989, & Moreno, J. L. 2011).

### **PIONEERING FORAYS INTO THE WORLD OF CREATIVITY**

In 1908, one year before entering Vienna University, Moreno visited the Augarten Park, and, after observing children, he started playing with them. He would sit at the foot of a tree, telling them stories, especially fairy tales, and see them play various roles. Impressed by their spontaneous and free expressions, he also noticed their ability in getting into arguments or fights, and then reconciling and remaining friends. The children were very amenable to role playing, as their parents observed them as well. He reached the conclusion that it was the children's innate spontaneity that enabled them to be so creative. Soon after, Moreno famously distilled his ideas on the subject, stating that creativity is an adequate response to a new situation and a new response to an old situation (Moreno, 1953).

During the following years of his long quest to work in action, he created many techniques to facilitate spontaneity while working with groups and thereby enhance people's creativity. True to his belief that action is more important than words, Moreno tested his ideas in action and later developed the relevant theories and techniques (Blatner, 1997). This was the case about creativity. With group psychotherapy, he tested out his work with prostitutes in 1912–1913, helping them form the first known support groups to empower them. Moreno followed a similar pattern with sociometry, starting with his work with war refugees in 1915. Throughout his pioneering work with psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy, Moreno did not follow any leader. As with in own life, he charted his own course, upon which to live and promote his ideas.

When Moreno entered Vienna University, in 1909, he studied theology and philosophy and had a keen interest in metaphysics. His aspirations and interests were always on a large scale.

“Moreno's theology has much to offer contemporary trends in spirituality. As our world becomes more multicultural, the various

religions are reforming and negotiating theological ideas (.....). Moreno's image of the divine as immanent, creative, and inviting the responsibility of co-creativity may help people honor each other more, to see the light of God in the struggles of neighbors and resist the many subtle temptations to retreat to the illusions of security through an overreliance on that which has already been created—what Moreno called the “cultural conserve.” Taking on the role of the co-creator can be energizing and refreshing when one considers the nature of the task as a grand, wondrous, open-ended sublime glory of helping God bring forth ever new forms. It's like participating in a great construction, a great celebration, and knowing that what you're doing is appreciated as a meaningful part of the whole. There's a lot of inspiration in such a model of the cosmos. Blatner (2000, p. 71)

These ideas about creativity, religion, and charity were also present when Moreno established the House of Encounter, together with his friend Chaim Kellmer. In addition to offering concrete services to people in need, they had daily meetings, thus forming groups for emotional and spiritual support. Among the participants, there were poor people, immigrants who did not speak the local language. Moreno and Kellmer identified a need and sought to offer solutions to it: a need to belong, to connect with others (Gershoni, 2024, Giacomucci, 2021, & Kellermann, 1992). Later, in 1915, as an advanced student of medicine, Moreno started working at a refugee camp in Mitterndorf. Thousands of refugees had to leave their homes and communities in South Tyrol, following the invasion of the Italians. They were housed in camps without any consideration of the location from which they arrived, family connections, religion, or other cultural factors. As fights broke out among them, there was a need to intervene, and this was the first time that Moreno applied ideas that later became known as sociometry. Attending to people's emotional, spiritual, linguistic, and other common wishes to connect with like-minded people, he helped by placing them in ways that mitigated disagreements and altercations. This work on sociometric principles continued after he graduated from medical school and established himself as a family physician.

Creativity, in addition to its artistic and expressive values, is also about finding proper solutions to human problems, and as Moreno viewed it, a powerful component of mental health. As Blatner (2000) points out, Moreno was a pioneer in considering creativity within the context of mental health, healing, and well-functioning. In fact, the word “creativity” could not be found in English dictionaries, until 100 years ago. Nowadays, it is a subject of prolific research, and there are academic departments, journals, and even an Encyclopedia of Creativity.

Hare A. P., & Hare J. R. (1996) clarify that spontaneity is a variable degree of adequate response to a situation. Spontaneity per se is not sufficient in leading to creativity. The element of adequacy is important, as it means that one must act

with skill and competence to be creative. The result of a creative endeavor is what Moreno termed “cultural conserve.” Even a finished product can propel others to add, change, and offer other creative ideas, making this an endless process throughout human life, as depicted in the Canon of Creativity (Moreno, 1953 p. 46, Moreno J. L., & Moreno F. B., 1944, Moreno, 1994, & Gershoni, 2024).

The warming-up process helps people become more spontaneous and ready to act. As in group work, when a group is warmed-up, members are less anxious, less fearful, and not defensive. These qualities, in general, are important elements of mental health and well-being (Moreno, 1953, & Schacht, 2007).

## **THE INTERSECTION OF CREATIVITY AND MULTICULTURALISM**

In 1925, Moreno immigrated from Vienna to the United States. He was invited with his brother-in-law, Franz Lörnitzo, to bring a voice recording device that they had invented. The General Phonograph Company in Ohio was interested in buying this invention, a precursor to what is now known as the tape recorder (Marineau, 2014). Soon after they arrived in the United States, the host company changed their mind, as other American companies were working on similar inventions. Lörnitzo returned to Vienna disappointed, while Moreno stayed in New York, trying to rebuild his life, with the ambition of reaching more people with his ideas. At his juncture, Moreno felt alone, had minimal knowledge of English, and was financially impoverished. His younger brother, William, who had immigrated to Florida earlier, was his sole source of financial support.

In a manner typical of his ideas about life and mental health, Moreno was determined to succeed. With his knowledge and sociometric intelligence, a term coined by Robert Siroka (personal conversation September 10, 1994), he began to reach out to local professionals. Gradually, he was invited to lead workshops on psychodrama at Mount Sinai Hospital and was well received there. Other invitations soon followed, to apply sociometry at the Hudson School for Girls, and the Sing-Sing prison. From then on, Moreno studied English and was able to pass the examination to practice medicine in New York. Within six years, he reached the pinnacle of the world of psychiatry, to the point that he was invited as a discussant for a psychoanalyst's presentation at the American Psychiatric Association (APA) conference in Philadelphia, in 1932 (Marineau, 2014, & Moreno, 2014). At that conference he declared “group psychotherapy” as a valid treatment method. This term had not been in use prior to that day. Moreno was loudly criticized and subjected to the consternation of many psychoanalysts attending the conference.

Jonathan D. Moreno, the son of J. L. Moreno and Zerka Moreno, wrote in his book *Impromptu Man*:

The emphasis on creativity put J. L. [Moreno] on all fours with an Anglo-American philosophical movement often called process philosophy. In contrast with classic Western philosophy, which understands reality as timeless, the process philosophy emphasized

becoming over being, viewing reality as a process of emergence rather than a static thing (....).

The fact that there was a strong American philosophical movement that fit so well with his conception of creativity helped J. L. identify with the intellectual side of his new country. Some of the process school also shared his interest in the philosophy of religion. Of the later important process philosophers, the most important was Charles Hartshorne (.....) in September 1978 Hartshorne said to me: “Your father once said that creativity was the most important idea of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I agree with that! (pp. 112–113)

Much of the research about migration focuses on economic, political, and social effects on the migrants and their host countries. According to the United Nations World Migration Report, which traces patterns of migration globally, there has been an increase in the number of people who relocated from their home countries.

The United States of America has been the country of choice for international migrants since 1970. In the following years, the number of foreign-born people residing in the country has more than quadrupled—from less than 12 million in 1970 to 51 million in 2019. Germany, the second largest destination for migrants, has also seen an increase over the years, from 8.9 million in 2000 to 16 million in 2020. While it is known that in many cases, migrants contribute to their host countries, they also benefit from moving to their new locations, even if the transition is fraught with difficulties and even crises (Epstein & Gang, 2010).

An important topic for researchers is the causal relationship between multiculturalism and creativity. The *Encyclopedia of Creativity* (Pritzker & Runco, 2020) cites research that indicates that foreign-born immigrants stimulated economic growth with their disproportionate degrees of eminent creativity and innovation. For example, although foreign-born immigrants represented only 13% of the US population, they accounted for 30% of all the patents granted, and for 25% of all the US Nobel Laureates. Sowell (1997) and Werbner (2005 and 2012) make similar claims as they describe the complex interrelationship between migrants and their host country.

Immigrants, whether leaving their home country of their own volition, or forced to flee wars, natural disasters, or oppressive regimes, face many hurdles. At times, they may also encounter hostile attitudes as they try to rebuild their lives and adjust to the new country and culture. These challenges make the dislocating and uprooting traumatic, but they necessitate mobilization of many resources: financial, social, emotional, and spiritual. This process calls for their own creativity to find adequate solutions to multiple problems, all at once. Migrants also bring with them skills, knowledge, and specific talents along with fresh new ideas. In this way, they have opportunities to excel at work or studies and have a positive impact on their host country. In the case of Moreno, he recreated his life and developed it beyond what had been available to him in Vienna.

In the forward to the book *The Essential Moreno* (Fox, 1987), Carl Whitaker, M.D., the renowned family therapist writes:

Dr. Moreno was one of the seminal figures in the world of psychiatry. He .....(was) such a remarkable contributor to the world of psychological understanding: the creativity of Picasso; and the characteristics that made those who produced the theater of the absurd so invasive of our inner world. He had a unique ability to open himself to others. His preoccupation with spontaneity and creativity was only matched by his dedication to behavior, to action rather than words. He discovered that we are all actors in the stage of life, and at the same time he exposed a great deal of our stage phobia (....). He was an exciting man, with a wonderful combination of Genet, Fritz Redl, Freud, and Picasso (....) (pp. vii, viii, & ix)

Such impressive accolades for a man who contributed so much to our culture and inspired generations of group psychotherapists and people who appreciate the knowledge and creativity of a giant thinker.

### THE DOWNSIDE OF REJECTION OF MULTICULTURALISM

For five hundred years, the Jewish minority in Spain enjoyed their life with many of the citizens. Lowney C. (2005) wrote about the significant achievements of Jews in Spain prior to the rise of the Catholic Kings. The Jewish culture flourished in Islamic Spain, between the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the rise of prominent Jews in commerce, trading, banking, and even in government offices, there were famous scholars in many fields: medicine, mathematics, sciences, poetry, and philosophy. Lowney attributed this to what he calls "Convivencia": co-existence in harmony between people of different cultures and religions. Lowney is enumerating the advantages of multiculturalism. That ended in 1492, and gradually the Golden Age of the Spanish Empire began to decline. Forced to either convert to Catholicism or face deportation, many Jews chose to leave and migrated eastward.

The Ottoman Empire offered refuge to the Jews expelled from Spain, not for humanitarian reasons, but because of an anticipation that Jews would benefit the empire both economically and by the knowledge and skills that they would bring along. Sultan Bayezid II encouraged Jews to settle in various parts of the Ottoman Empire, which was ascending to become a major regional power in the coming centuries. Many settled in Italy, and others in Thessaloniki. Most, however, continued to Constantinople and Anatolia. Gerber (1994), who was the director of Sephardic Studies at CUNY, adds another element which seems to support the perpetual concept of creativity, as described by Moreno. She states that contrary to logical expectations, the expulsion of Jews became a factor in renewed creativity in the newly found locations. Wandering between countries, until they reached their desired destination, they added to their knowledge more languages and became familiar with other cultures. As the Ottoman empire expanded, they

ruled parts of North Africa, the Middle East, and extended their reach to Europe. In 1529, Suleiman the Magnificent and the Ottoman army conquered Vienna. Among other things, they introduced coffee to this beautiful city that later developed a culture of famous coffee houses.

In Spain, the former powerful empire was in a state of gradual decline. There were many reasons for the deterioration of Spain during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some historians argue that the uprooting of Jews and other non-Catholic minorities contributed to the country's downgrading in power and influence. The expulsion caused economic losses, brain drain, and had a significant cultural impact, as it destroyed the diverse cultural fabric of Spain (Nadeau, & Barlow, 2023).

Fast forward to 2015; as if to atone for their sins, Spain offered Spanish citizenship to descendants of Jews who suffered indignities under the Catholic kings and refused to convert to Catholicism (Inalcik, 1994).

### SUMMARY AND (DIS)CLOSURE

J. L. Moreno is known as the creator of psychodrama and an early pioneer of group psychotherapy, sociometry, role theory, and systemic thought, which considers individuals in their social contexts and the reciprocal effects on both. Moreno was also the first to explore the concept of creativity and its importance for human development and survival. A prolific writer of books and articles, he also developed many action techniques that are used by psychotherapists of various schools of thought. What is described in this article appears to have implications to present-day societies. The arguments for—and more vociferously—against migration have real consequences for many countries. Important among these is the diminishing creativity and creative output in countries that outrightly reject immigrants. This may have a long-term adverse effect on the quality of life, education, and well-being of citizens in a globalized world.

On a personal note, this article touches on my own musings about the route that I have taken, fueled by my own curiosity and willingness to go into the unknown. I grew up in Jerusalem, in a neighborhood with many immigrants; families from Kurdistan (Iraq, Syria, and Iran), North Africa, and from the Balkan countries. My parents came from South Eastern Türkiye and the Aleppo region, they spoke Hebrew and Arabic. A tight-knit community developed there as families were helping each other, overcoming the traumas of migrating—often fleeing their home countries—and creating a new life in a country that had just been declared independent. I grew up bi-lingual and had an early exposure to Kurdish and Ladino. In high school, I studied English and Latin. Later, as a social worker in Oakland, California, I studied Spanish, which helped in my work with immigrants from Mexico. After moving to New York, I continued to learn Spanish and attended summer classes in Zaragoza, Spain. Since a young age, I have had an infatuation with Spanish culture, literature, music, Moorish architecture, and the fiery dance: flamenco—all integrated conserves of multiculturalism.

Moreno's biography is an example of an immigrant who contributed a great deal to the host countries, and beyond. I am a recipient of his creativity via his student, Bob Siroka, and other senior trainers in the field. Like Dr. Siroka, I continue to lead groups whose memberships are similar in their diversity to the one

that I was trained in. I believe that having group members from various backgrounds enriches the experience of all. As I build on the legacy of those who came before me, the cycle illustrated in the Canon of Creativity continues.

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