

# Sociodrama as a Social Diagnostic Tool: Our Experience in Paraguay

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article, we describe a sociodrama that we staged as a training experience for a group in Paraguay. After evaluating our experience with this group, we concluded that sociodrama is a viable intervention that merits further exploration by psychodramatists.

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**OUR PURPOSE IN STAGING** the sociodrama described in this article was to use it as a learning experience for a training group we were working with in Paraguay. Once the project was announced, more people became interested in participating, and the final composition of the group left the psychodramatists in the minority. Twenty-five people arrived one Saturday afternoon to participate in the sociodramatic experience. The director explained the Living Newspaper, which was the chosen format. This particular format is very useful for warming up to sociodramas because it very often mirrors the political situation of the country where it is being played out. Further, it is fundamental that all psychodramatists have experience with this tool, the most Morenean of them all.

Four groups were formed. Each group received the day's newspaper and the following instructions: Each group should choose an article, put together a "photograph" (as an image or sculpture) of the topic, and give it a title. Once the groups had composed the "photos," they would present them to the larger group, which would vote to select the image with which the greatest number of people felt some identification.

## **Choosing the Issues**

The four images presented had the following titles and themes:

Group 1: The Vital Lesson—an ecological theme that referred to the destruction of Paraguay's trees and other natural resources.

- Group 2: Challenge—a feminist theme that referred to the many roles that women have to perform and the strength that women must have to respond to them. (This was an interesting group composed of many of the feminists present. They chose their theme first and then searched the newspaper for an article to match it.)
- Group 3: Social Justice—a theme that referred to the different groups in Paraguay struggling for social justice and to the forces that oppose them.
- Group 4: Homeless—a theme that referred to the people left homeless after floods in Paraguay.

When the participants arrived at the point of voting, their choices were fairly well distributed among the proposed images/“photographs,” but that of Group 3, on Social Justice, won the sociometric vote. This was a very powerful image. When Group 3 first presented it, a ripple of response echoed through the audience. A rough sketch is presented in Figure 1.

Group 3 had constructed an image that included personification of the important roles of Paraguayan society: two campesinos (or peasants), one of whom was having her foot stepped on by Parliament; Special Police Force who was pointing her finger in the form of a gun toward them; Justice with her back to Special Police Force; and Community that looked on with her eyes covered with one hand, but with the fingers open for peeking. Campesinos make up 60% of the population of Paraguay. The police force referred to in the

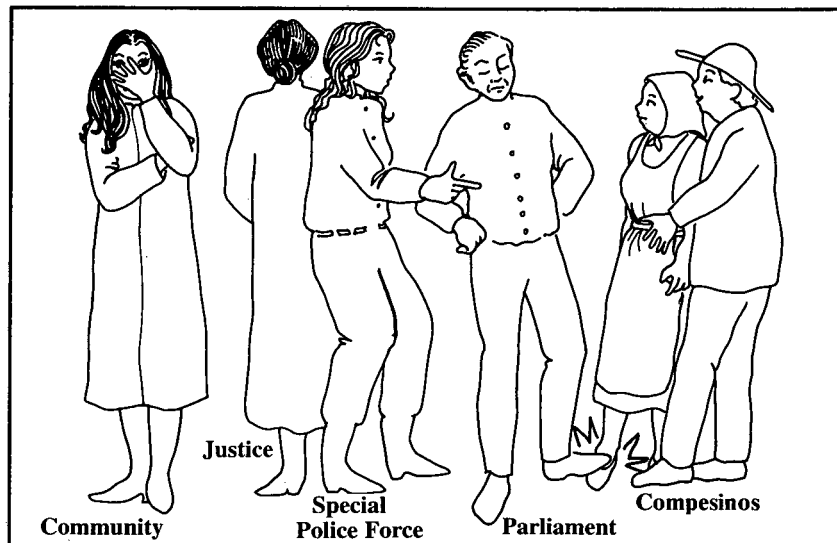


FIGURE 1. Sketch of the image presented by Group 3.

sociodrama was the one that had terrorized the population during Stroessner's 35-year reign. In the group's image, Justice stood behind Police Force, an allusion to the years when even the justice system submitted to the military dictatorship and turned a blind eye to what was happening. The image of Community was perhaps most significant: a representation of a society that could see what was happening but tried to hide behind ignorance of the facts.

Once the vote had been taken, the director asked the members of the original "photograph" and the members who had voted for it to remain. The director had the original image re-enacted and asked the new members to enter it with the roles of their choice. Action was given to the image.

The director gave the following instructions to the larger group: All those in the enlarged group could participate in the sociodrama, provided that before entering the stage, they pass by the "naming committee" (in this case, the Auxiliary Ego, who wrote down on a piece of paper the role the individual wished to act out in the unfolding drama). These papers were taped to participants' chests with masking tape to help keep track of what was happening and who was playing which role. Participants could change roles during the drama but had to change their identifying nametags as well. The psychodramatic space had been drawn out on the floor with masking tape. If participants were pushed out of the dramatic space, they could not return unless they assumed a new role.

The sociodrama began, and chaos ensued. A preacher began to preach to the group from atop a "soapbox." The campesino section, enlarged by new members who had entered the fray, yelled and screamed for their rights, demonstrating in front of Parliament. The woman who played the role of Special Police Force immediately shed her role and became a campesino. Several new members entered as idealists who wanted to restructure society.

Suddenly, "Stroessner," "Rodriguez" (the president during the transition and a military general), and several military personnel entered in an attempt to take over. The other members of the group immediately joined together to expel them from the scene. Now only the campesinos were left, and the woman who had turned campesino became Campesino President as a result of the popular revolt.

### **Intervention by the Director**

At this point, the director intervened with the following proposal: "You have an opportunity to restructure the Paraguayan society as you see fit. You may name government leaders, ministers, etc., whatever you like. Go for it." Campesino President immediately began naming the Ministers of Health, Education, and Agrarian Reform. Several more people became campesinos. An honest Social Justice was named as well as Community Committed to the Poor.

Parliament became a campesino parliament. Once the basic government unit was formed, President left her presidency and became Politics.

Several attempts were made to make this society work. A representative of the refugees homeless after the flood sat on the floor begging and yelling for help. One of the two men in the group put on a sign, "Society Without Men," as a protest against the feminist/female vein society had taken. Several participants entered as the People, stating that they were not campesinos and that they too needed representation in the new society. At this point, the director froze the scene and interviewed each member in the drama.

Politics reported that she had come to realize that it was a very difficult task to try to organize and change society and that it was not quite as easy as she imagined. Agrarian Reform could not understand why Campesinos continued to complain so much after they had received what they wanted—land, tools, machinery, and seeds. Refugee complained that nobody tended to her needs. She was hungry and cold and homeless. When the director bent down to talk to Refugee at eye-level, Refugee mentioned that the director had been the first one to look her straight in the eye. She went on to complain that Education had given her a book, but she did not know how to read. Honest Social Justice had given her a roof but had almost squashed her over the head with it. Health could not even give her an aspirin. What was she to do? The man who complained about the predominately female society stated that he felt excluded and doubted there was room for him, as a man, in the society that the group was building. People reported that its group was not composed of campesinos, but rather of doctors, teachers, housewives, and so forth, and that the solutions for the campesinato were not necessarily solutions for People. There was a generalized feeling of impotence among the group's members: They wanted to contribute to a better society but really did not know how.

Once the interviews were completed, the participants sat down, stopped for a coffee break because we had been working together for over two hours, and returned a few minutes later to evaluate the meaning of the sociodrama for Paraguayan society. Everyone was asked to share individual feelings about the roles. The participants stated that they enjoyed the experience and never imagined that a sociodrama could bring about such richness of content. They were astounded and frustrated with some of the turns that the action had taken as they began to realize that running a country is not a simple effort. They were all convinced of the authenticity of what the action portrayed—their reality—and the effectiveness of using a sociodrama to draw out socio-political profiles.

### **Participants' Discussion and Evaluation**

Within the group, there had been a high level of expectation when the action began and a sense of commitment to what they were doing throughout the

action. The participants also realized that they had had their chance to change their situation, and they recognized the enormous complexity involved in doing such a thing. We observed that, when given the chance, they realized that they too had resorted to force and autocratic stereotypes to resolve problems. That was the only political model most of those present had ever known. They were able to pinpoint the holes and pitfalls of their idealized and theoretical solutions. They perceived what would not work. They had their work cut out for them, trying to figure out what would work.

A great many interesting conclusions came out of this discussion.

1. The theme chosen was the matter of social justice, a very touchy and dangerous subject under the Paraguayan dictatorship, which only now begins to have a chance to come out in the open.

2. When action is given to the group, chaos ensued, as we mentioned earlier. This disorder, in part, is normal, if we consider the Identity Matrix, described by Moreno, from which order will come. (We believe that groups follow the different phases of the Identity Matrix as they form. A new group will be especially chaotic and will slowly organize itself to such a point that, in time, members can eventually role-reverse with each other.) Yet it is also descriptive of the confusion that members of Paraguayan society are going through as they try to learn new roles under a democratic regime.

3. In the face of such disorder an attempt is usually made to organize the group, but such an attempt imposes order. In this case, the military intervenes to organize the government but is expelled. It is obvious that society resists this kind of imposed solution, under which the people have lived for 35 years.

4. Once the initial action subsides with the expulsion of the military, there is a lull and a kind of vacuum. At this point, the director intervenes to propose a new social structure. Campesino President is practically self-elected (much in the same way that the military had come to power 35 years before) and autocratically distributes the roles of institutions: Education, Health, Social Justice. However, how to perform the duties involved in these roles is not explained or taught. This episode clearly reflects what is happening in Paraguay: The institutions exist, but nobody really knows how to make them work, especially in an efficient and pragmatic way.

5. Another interesting observation about this stage of the sociodrama is the lack of dialogue between parties. Nobody discussed anything—how to do things or what was to be done—with anybody else. There were no consultations or requests for help from anyone. Everyone did what he or she saw fit. If we pick up the daily newspapers, we can also confirm that this is what is happening in Paraguayan society at large. Basic decisions are made without consulting the parties who will be affected by these decisions or who will be subjected to their consequences.

6. One member who represented Calls for Election was thoroughly ignored. It seems that once again, we stumble upon our recognition of the fact that the dynamics of free elections are still not properly understood.

7. When Paraguay has to deal with a national disaster, such as the serious flooding that occurred, the inadequacies of the system stand out clearly. How can one help the refugees? No one really knows where or how to begin, and the alternatives that are offered are not good solutions to the problems. Either too much is given (the roof that comes down over Refugee's head), or inadequate help is offered (books to the illiterate).

8. An issue that was also clearly brought out is the matter of gender. This society in our sociodrama had been structured with women in the different roles, but the few men who participated felt excluded by the women's feminist attitudes. This raised the gender-specific issue. One woman left the scene because she refused to participate in a society without men. The women who had been People stated that they did not want a male campesino president because all of them "were a bunch of machistas."

The selection of the president is perceived by the men as group exclusion by gender; whereas the women feel uncomfortable because of what they perceive as a male threat. It seems that in this new society that is rising from the old ashes, there are the beginnings of redefinition of gender-specific roles. Participants ponder: What does it mean to be a man or a woman in this new community? The women contend that a male president sees People as a group that gets in the way and does not really seem to help. In reality, People have come on stage precisely to lend a hand to the process of building a new society. The two sides seem to have difficulty perceiving each other's intentions.

In our assessment of this sociodrama, we must mention two aspects that we observed. First, in this country, the role of citizenship in a democratic regime is poorly developed. This means that as citizens of Paraguay, the people are just beginning to understand and practice this new role of citizenship. Second, the lack of a clear idea of the motives and actions as these were portrayed by the participants leads us to understand that the social telic perception leaves much to be desired. If this society can move toward a more telic communication/perception, there should be better social adjustment.

### Conclusion

After our experiences with the use of sociodrama as a training exercise, we would encourage other psychodramatists to investigate the field of sociodrama. We consider this to be a very powerful social diagnostic tool and hope that we have illustrated this by our analysis of the Paraguayan experience. Perhaps as

we better comprehend social processes through analyses like these, we can also develop adequate interventions that will lead to improved social adjustments.

*Author's note:* At the time of the revision of this article, almost a year after the sociodrama, the Paraguayan people have elected a president who will most probably not "rock the political boat" they have been in for so many years and will give them "more of the same."

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Date of submission:  
December 11, 1992

Date of final acceptance:  
October 16, 1993

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