

Review

Rebels with a Cause: Working with Adolescents Using Action Techniques

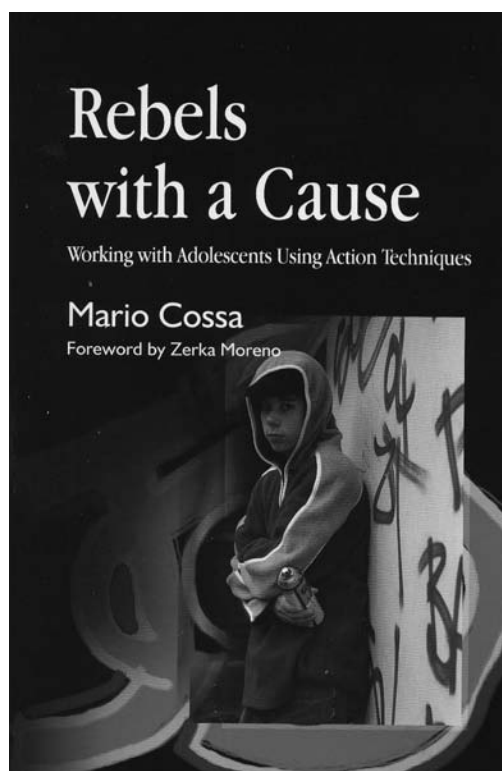
by Mario Cossa, 2006, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Reviewed by Martin Putt

Early in the book is a telling quote from drama therapist Renee Emunah. Writing about therapists working with adolescents she states that: "most people steer away from them. They are considered hostile, moody, narcissistic, withdrawn, aggressive, rebellious, and unpredictable ... Therapists seem to be either particularly reluctant or particularly drawn to working with them". This book, 'Rebels with a Cause', is for those, like Mario, who are particularly drawn to working with them.

If you work with adolescents in groups from a psychodramatic framework or are considering how you might make better use of action techniques in your groupwork I think you will find this book invaluable. It will develop the way you think about your groups, plan your work, and deepen your understanding as to how action can be used in groupwork with adolescents to make the work more interesting, productive, and enjoyable.

Mario Cossa, as well as being a certified TEP in psychodrama and group psychotherapy, is a leading drama therapist, and theatre educator. He has been running youth development groups in his native USA for the better part of his professional life. Groups for young people to creatively address the issues of importance for themselves and their worlds. Mario has incorporated psychodrama and sociodrama, expressive therapies and improvisational theatre performance in his work. This book is a culmination of this work and in Zerka Moreno's words from the Foreword, "a very fine and



complete guide to using action methods effectively and appropriately with adolescent groups".

The book is divided into three parts: Warm Up, Action and Sharing. Part 1, Warm Up, includes a philosophical and theoretical basis for working with adolescents using action that utilizes J.L. and Zerka Moreno's universalia of psychotherapy - time, space, reality and cosmos - alongside more widely known

developmental and trauma perspectives. Part 2, Action, explores action techniques as they might be used at various stages of a group's development. He includes activities that could be utilized as groups begin, as they move through 'testing' behaviours in the transition to greater interpersonal connection and more ability to engage in 'the work' of the group, and then on toward a healthy termination. Throughout these chapters Mario describes different ways that sociometric explorations, sociodramatic and psychodramatic enactments, and other action methods can be applied so that they are effective, safe and productive. The last chapters of the book, in Part 3, Sharing, briefly consider action methods in adolescent groups in particular settings or with specific issues such as substance use, suicide, and developmental disability. This encourages us to reflect upon and consider how we think about groups and action methods and how our practice emanates from these beliefs and concepts in ourselves as group leaders.

The final additions to the book include appendices where one can find some sample forms Mario has used with groups and parents of youth, a list of youth group 'norms' and 15 seriously handy pages of ideas, starters, and warm-ups for opening and closing adolescent groups

I enjoyed Mario's voice as I read this book. Mario obviously loves his work and loves young people. He does not consider them big children or small adults, but values deeply the unique and intense experience of and approach to life youth exhibit. I appreciated the discussion about theoretical foundations for considering adolescent groups. I found particularly interesting the parallels he draws between our understandings of individual development in infancy and early childhood and the developmental nature of group life. He then expands these considerations out to bring in the developmental challenges of adolescence. From here he discusses how action based group work with adolescents can assist them both

with developmental repair and with healthy personal, interpersonal and transpersonal development.

Mario makes note of how the recent focus in therapy on scientific methods and measurable outcomes has led to research in youth prevention curricula to find what factors correlate most with effective outcomes. What has been distinguished includes:

- i) using action rather than just discussion or lecture,
- ii) using role play for the rehearsal of social skills, and
- iii) using peer educators that are a few years older than the participants as mentors.

This certainly provides some confidence and surety to those of us working with adolescents in groups that utilise the concepts of sociometry, warm-up, enactment, role training, and action insight and provides fertile soil for individual and group learning. In places he has a lovely turn of phrase, for example, where he argues for respectful group practice where young people are "invited to explore rather than ordered to behave".

I found this book very useful and as I read it found myself thinking much about my own practice: questioning the efficacy of open vs. closed groups in work with young people, questioning notions of leadership and authority in adolescent groups, considering differences between director-directed warm-up and more group-centred approaches, noticing how easy as a leader it is to stay rooted in the chair talking, and recognising more and more how "warm-up is all". I found myself valuing the work I do with adolescents and having creative impulses for how I could incorporate more of my psychodramatic thinking and practice into assisting the youth I work with to better meet the developmental challenge of movement from "life is something that happens to me" towards "life is something I participate in creating". I valued this book's effect as a catalyst for my own development and learning.

One drawback I experienced with this book was that it mostly considers groupwork from the particular model of a youth development group utilising a year-long closed group with mixed-gender, voluntary participation by seemingly higher functioning youth. I found this limiting and a little too 'tidy' given the fact that many of us working with youth in groups are engaged in clinical practice with open groups, or short term groups, often in 'single-issue' contexts with clients who present particular challenges. Perhaps this simply leads us to the need for more books in the psychodramatic literature about action method applications in adolescent group work with specific populations, and how experiential learning and action techniques can co-exist with other often more dominant modalities such as cognitive behavioural therapy and psychodynamic approaches. One of the great contributions Mario's book will continue to hold for some time however is the

bringing together of theoretical underpinnings and practice and providing a practical hands-on guide to action techniques with young people.

This book is a valuable resource for all Training Centre libraries and I recommend those of us who are working with adolescents or are beginning to feel drawn to such work to add this book to your own library shelves for easy, ongoing referral. In saying that there is also much value in this book for group leaders who are both looking for practical resources about using action methods, and are considering the integration of more of your psychodramatic training and techniques into your group practice. •

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