

Death by 1000 Banalities – Testing Spontaneity Theory in Mental Health

by Dr Kevin Franklin

Kevin Franklin is in private practice as a clinical psychologist and educator in Perth. He is a Psychodramatist and TEPIT and has recently helped form a regional association and a new ANZPA training centre in Western Australia. In this article he explores the link between spontaneity and Coming Out. Coming Out is a universal process of self-realisation – in which the real identity, the true nature is expressed. He contrasts this with a foreclosed identity dominated by social conserves – as a client describes it ‘a death by 1000 banalities’. Kevin demonstrates a clear link between Coming Out and mental health.

It is a generally accepted psychodramatic principle that ‘anxiety is the absence of spontaneity’. During my research into the origin and nature of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the opportunity arose for me to put Moreno’s axiom to empirical test.

While I know psychodrama works from my own experience, I also value scientific proof. This reflects my interest in integrating science and religion.

Spontaneity

How did Dr J. L. Moreno discover spontaneity? He found experimentally that people in everyday situations were unable to take action, or act appropriately. An absence of action and an absence of appropriate action indicate an inability to engage free will (Latin, *sponte*).

In his experiments mirroring life itself participants often came to know how they might or could act.

He describes a spontaneity state as follows (1980, p. 83):

The starting point was the state into which the subject threw himself for the purpose of expression. He threw himself into it at will. There was no past image guiding him, at least not consciously. There was no striving in him to repeat a past performance or to surpass it. He warmed up to a state of feeling often jerkily and inadequately. He showed a sense of relationship to people and things around him. After a few moments of tension came relaxation and pause, the anti-climax. We called this state the Spontaneity State.

There are measurable degrees of approximation to a spontaneity state; low, medium and high. Moreno (1980, p. 247) devised the axiometric scale evaluating societal and cultural patterns. At one end of the scale were forms with a high degree of spontaneity with no conserve portion or a low degree of it; on the other end of the scale were forms with a high degree of conserve with no spontaneity, or a low degree of it. Most human activity occurs somewhere between these two poles. Following Moreno's axiom that 'anxiety is the absence of spontaneity' conserved behaviour associated with an absence of spontaneity should predict high anxiety.

The 'Coming Out' Scale

As a clinical psychologist, psychodramatist and gay man I see the relevance of this scale of spontaneity in the homosexual coming out process. Coming out is a term used by lesbians and gays to describe the process of openly identifying as a lesbian or gay to oneself and to other people. Coming out is part of a broad range of human experiences, sometimes mystical, called realisation. This refers to our knowing an answer to the prime identity question: Who am I? Developmentally, this begins a wholistic experience of life.

We can apply Moreno's axiometric scale to the process of coming out. At the low spontaneity end of the scale we see the closet gay dominated by conserved societal and cultural norms about sexuality – and at the high spontaneity end of the scale we see the openly out gay person, freer from restrictive norms, living with greater spontaneity.

Conserved notions of sexuality imply that everyone is or should be heterosexual, that it is the only valid form of sexual expression and that heterosexual (or straight) relationships are normal and superior. Homosexuality is then seen as a developmental failure to be heterosexual. This implies a moral imperative for gays and lesbians to not act sexually and to live an imposed celibacy. This conditioning or readying of the person to accept a false identity may foreclose on the real but

neglected and even abused gay identity. This social pattern of neglect and abuse of the psychodramatic roles in a person has created a culture of conflict.

Accepting oneself as gay involves freeing the self from these oppressive assumptions and from a mistaken (ie co-dependent) identity.

The homosexual person easily finds himself in a profound personal and interpersonal conflict between two imperatives – the conserve and the free will. They can be caught in a conflict that prolongs their identity crisis, which may become labelled as mental illness – that is, conserved.

A gay man dominated by old cultural conserves about homosexuality can fail to live out his gayness and so experiences the anguish of a failing existence (anxiety). Living passively his false identity reinforces by associative learning his emptiness, boredom and despair (eg anaclitic depression). He may attempt to escape from these strictures of reality through, for example, workaholism, drugs, sexual-gluttony, mania, suicide or violence.

With a sudden loss of his socially created false identity (being outed or outing himself) and an inability to maintain his individuation (the emerging spontaneous self) there may be an unpleasant experience of disunity (eg de-realisation, de-personalisation, realisation psychosis). This may be temporary, intermittent or become more permanent (eg schizophrenia).

Understanding these Coming Out phenomena in a health and reality-based framework is important to the clinician. Coming Out & Outness is a universal individuation process that reflects Becoming & Being in religious language and Nurture & Nature in scientific language.

Testing the Spontaneity Axiom

During my research on the origins and nature of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the opportunity arose to put Moreno's axiom to empirical test, by comparing three groups differing in level of spontaneity state.

The data from homosexual male subjects was divided into three groups using a self-report scale of Homosexual Identity Formation (Cass, 1984). This scale expresses and objectifies the Coming Out process. It classifies six stages of homosexual identity formation with characteristic cognitive, affective and behavioural elements. The six stages were combined to form low, middle and high spontaneity state groups for the purpose of this analysis.

Discriminant analysis was the statistical technique used to identify the main factor associated in the data with different levels of spontaneity state.

Homophobia (IHP) was measured by the Index of Homophobia (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). Other variables shown here are from the SCL-90-R (Derogatis, 1983). Results are shown below.

Results and Conclusions

These results show a compelling trend – decreasing values of distress with increasing values of spontaneity.

Moreno predicted that the absence of spontaneity would predict psycho-pathology and socio-pathology in general, and specifically, that the absence of spontaneity predicts anxiety.

The trends on all variables demonstrate his general prediction. Also these results

specifically demonstrate that anxiety (as phobic anxiety, psychoticism and homophobia) is the discriminating factor associated with an absence of spontaneity.

Implications

I see two main implications arising from this empirical study.

Firstly, the obvious, that spontaneity is good for your health. Psychodramatists have in spontaneity a general explanation of mental illness and health. The origin and nature of health (and the link between low creative spontaneity and mental illness) has scientific proof.

From this can be proposed a resurrection of the unified self, an Outness from the tomb of spiritual death that is mental illness associated with the dominion of old conserves. To me this expresses the rising of a new unified human consciousness as we begin our third millennium.

A Case Study of Identity Synthesis: Advanced Coming Out

Over 40, Jack is a gay man who runs his own successful business. He stutters at times. Jack's main concern is his aloneness. He has a sense of failure and loneliness if he is not in a relationship. He is back in counselling because of a recently failed relationship. He remains concerned that he is attracted to and likes

HOMOSEXUAL MALE GROUPS	Low s (n = 20)	Middle s (n = 65)	High s (n = 39)
VARIABLE			
Somatisation	65	43	38
Obsessive-Compulsive	85	82	59
Interpersonal Sensitivity	106	76	53
Depression	109	73	58
Anxiety	83	50	30
Hostility	53	41	30
Phobic Anxiety * (social phobia)	52	17	7
Paranoid Ideation	80	66	50
Psychoticism *	78	41	21
Global Severity Index (GSI)	83	57	41
Homophobia (IHP) *	59	45	42
* Statistically Significant			
TABLE 1: SCORES SHOWING THE LINK BETWEEN SPONTANEITY (s) AND VARIABLES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS			



having sex with younger men. In today's session, his latest – Bill, in his late 20s – has given him the flick.

Jack is locked in battle with his introjected social conserves: automatic assumptions about loneliness and living that emulate the banal straight world culture he experienced while growing up.

Jack enjoys being left to his own devices; he is resourceful and exuberant, resisting the conserves to which many are bound. In the vitality of young men he sees that his own battle against identity foreclosure is not yet lost.

I put to Jack that he enjoys 'life in the fast lane'. In Jack's Megalomania normalis state of being he is a Superman, a Virtuoso-of-Life who is very successful in business (professional identity) and lifestyle (personal identity).

He is an exuberant Prince and what he says goes.

However, his recent partner Bill has said he wants a monogamous partnership. Jack warms up to uncertainty and to loss-of-Life via imagined death-by-1000-banalities. How can this alive, vibrant and exuberant man suppress himself into an imagined banal suburban lifestyle such as that modelled by his family? How can Superman package himself into a Clark Kent container acceptable to Lois Lane? Instead, he resists. Jack as Private Rebel automatically rails against his own ruthlessly imposed conformist world-view. Jack automatically gives up on the Universal Man, alias Bill. Temporarily.

He is railing against his automatic assumptions about monogamy. As a Prince he has sown his seed widely and with gay abandon. Now, the question is whether maturity is a closing down (eg becoming a tired old queen) or whether maturity is offering him something important such as real love, rather than merely lust.

Judged against cultural norms there is a 'surplus' of Jack. His containerisation of himself does him a damage far worse than his occasional stuttering. He warms to the

enabling view that he is attracted to young men not simplistically because they are 'chickens' (with his associated guilt) but because he is alive and he enjoys their freshness, their vitality and their exuberance. He doesn't find this in older men (whom he associates with identity foreclosure). To maintain his personal identity he needs auxiliaries with vitality. He emotionally associates this mirror externally with young men. There is in this man a growing awareness of a quiet, still and wise man within. The Prince is psychologically transforming into a King. The Prince and the King are becoming One.

We revisit the Jack and Bill separation. He realises that in his automatic assumptions around monogamy he has responded bumptiously, failing to maintain his connection with himself and the other. With assistance, Jack reconsiders how he could explore the issue of monogamy with Bill. He begins to create a differentiated vision of what a monogamous relationship with Bill could be like. I put to Jack that he needs to keep Coming Out in an experimental and collaborative way so that he might engage with Bill instead of reducing himself and Bill. With a twinkle in his eye he says he'd like to communicate much better. He's motivated to connect with the deeper creative levels of his personality, to practise improvisation in relationship (ie, spontaneity).

Integration

This man who occasionally stutters has an unresolved resistance to a cultural conserve. He lives comfortably with this remnant of his psychosomatic infancy. He unknowingly resists cultural conserves – 'his introjected social roles' – and so there is conflict (normalised psychological defence) in him and with others. His psychosocial conflict is prolonged by cultural norms that he has internalised as social roles. However, this man is increasingly able to be spontaneous, to be objective with himself and with others. He is more Out as a way of life, not as an ephemeral phenomenon, but as a state of being.

Bibliography

Cass, V. C. (1984). Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical model. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 20, 143–167.

Derogatis, L. R. (1983). *SCL-90-R* (2nd ed.). USA: Clinical Psychometric Research.

Franklin, K. T. (1988). *Gender identity in the homosexual male: Identifying and testing two theories of object relations within the personality*. Unpublished doctoral

dissertation, University of Tasmania, Tasmania.

Hudson, W., and Ricketts, W. A. (1980). A strategy for the measurement of homophobia. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 5, 357–372.

Moreno, J. L. (1980). *Psychodrama Vol. 1*, 6th ed. Beacon NY: Beacon House Inc.

this man is
increasingly able to be
spontaneous, to be
objective with himself
and with others