

BPA Comms Team News Story

How do you wound and heal a psychodramatist?

My journey into moral injury, ethical anger, and telic empathy

By Claudia Vau

The psychotherapist's wound

What injures a psychotherapist most deeply?

It's *not*, in my experience, exposure to trauma.

It is knowing what constitutes ethical, compassionate practice requires, and being unable to act accordingly, not because of personal failing, but because of organisational cultures that privilege procedural compliance over professional ethics and authentic human encounter, because of impossible contradictions between institutional policy and clinical care, because of the experience of raising concerns and finding oneself more isolated for having done so.

The account I give here, is of my journey towards understanding such wounding not according to medical or therapeutic categories but as a distinctive *moral injury*, resulting in *ethical anger*, which calls for *telic empathy* to bring about healing.

Professional learning

Over the past 12 years, my professional experience has included work as a psychodrama group psychotherapist within a prison-based therapeutic community, the National Health Service and a private addiction rehabilitation setting. Across these contexts, I encountered trauma, ethical dilemmas and organisational pressures, that eventually led me to conceptualise certain experiences not just as vicarious trauma and burnout, but as *moral injury*. These experiences, together with supervision, subsequent reflection and

engagement with the literature, offered me a framework for understanding what may occur when tension arises between professional values, moral agency and organisational contexts, motivating me to find ways to think about and navigate, if not resolve this tension.

The relationship between organisational systems, moral agency, and therapeutic practice may become fraught. Establishing a systemic, relational model that works is perhaps more beneficial to all than pathologising and healing morally injured practitioners.

What Is Moral Injury?

Moral injury was first described in the context of military psychology and has since extended to healthcare, social care, prison staff, and other professions where people act within complex systems that may conflict with their deeply held values. It is distinct from burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, though all four may co-occur.

Burnout arises from chronic occupational stress. Compassion fatigue from prolonged empathic engagement. Vicarious trauma from repeated exposure to others' traumatic experiences. Moral injury is different: it develops specifically from experiences that violate one's moral beliefs, or from being prevented from acting in accordance with one's ethical values (Dean et al., 2019; Litz et al., 2009).

Crucially, moral injury is not solely an individual phenomenon. Recent scholarship emphasises that it emerges within organisational and systemic contexts — when institutions produce double binds, impossible demands, and structures that make ethical action unavailable (Molendijk et al., 2022). From a systemic perspective, what appears as an individual's collapse of conscience is often a relational and organisational injury.

Tele and the Disruption of Authentic Encounter

Psychodrama offers a distinctive lens through which to understand moral injury. Moreno (1953/1993) proposed that psychological health depends upon *tele*: the

reciprocal and realistic perception that enables authentic encounter between people. Tele is not simply rapport or empathy — it is the living relational fabric that makes genuine human connection possible.

I propose that moral injury is not only an injury to conscience. It is an injury to tele itself. Within Organisational cultures where procedural compliance displaces opportunities for ethical dialogue and authentic encounter, practitioners may continue to function professionally while experiencing an increasing threat to ethical congruence, and to the relational ground that makes therapeutic work alive. The injury is simultaneously moral, relational, and existential.

Ethical Anger: A Morenian Concept Recovered from Marcia Karp's Private Archive

Each time I have spoken of moral injury in supervision with Marcia Karp, she has spontaneously associated it with a concept articulated by Zerka Moreno: *ethical anger*. Zerka Moreno introduced this concept in an unpublished commencement address delivered at Lesley College Graduate School on August 31, 1983. To my knowledge — and to Marcia Karp's — it has never previously appeared in the published psychodrama literature. The address was transcribed from a reading by Marcia Karp in February 2026, and exists solely as a private archival document. Marcia Karp and I share scholarly responsibility for bringing it into the published record.

Zerka Moreno's point was that context changes everything: the same action can be right in one moment and wrong in the next. What the concept of ethical anger added was the recognition that certain moments call for anger as a matter of conscience — that refusing to let something happen, when our conscience won't allow it, isn't a lapse of professionalism but a legitimate, even necessary, response. And in acting on our conscience, we are not only protecting our integrity, but also becoming “a model for others to think about and emulate.” (Moreno, Z. T., 1983)

Zerka Moreno distinguished ethical anger from righteous indignation and destructive aggression. It is not the anger of retaliation. It is the passionate, spontaneous expression

of conscience in the face of injustice — an anger that arises from the same source as creativity and spontaneity, and that refuses to permit the violation of deeply held human values. On the psychodramatic stage, it may be enacted as catharsis in surplus reality. In everyday life, it can only find legitimate expression through ethical action.

This concept reframes something that the moral injury literature tends to pathologise or overlook: the anger of the morally injured practitioner is not evidence of disorder. It may be evidence of conscience.

Telic Empathy: The Mechanism of Moral Repair

In earlier clinical work within a prison-based therapeutic community, I proposed the concept of *telic empathy* to describe an emotionally porous and reflexive clinical stance, whereby trauma and pain are creatively processed in action, promoting reciprocal connection between therapist, group, and the organisational context (Vau, 2019).

Reconsidered through Moreno's concept of tele and Zerka Moreno's ethical anger, telic empathy becomes more than a therapeutic attitude. It becomes the relational mechanism through which moral repair may occur.

Telic empathy is intentional, reciprocal, and reflexive. Unlike affective empathy, which risks emotional contagion, or cognitive empathy, which can privilege understanding over encounter, telic empathy preserves authentic connection whilst enabling therapist and client to co-create the conditions for restoring moral agency.

The model I propose is a relational sequence: moral injury disrupts tele and moral agency; ethical anger is the spontaneous moral response that refuses ethical compromise; telic empathy transforms this anger into authentic encounter on the psychodramatic stage; and moral repair restores spontaneity, creativity, and reciprocal connection.

Healing is not an individual achievement. It is a relational and systemic process, emerging through ethical encounter. From a systemic perspective, it may also catalyse

first, second, and ultimately third-order change within organisations — an enduring capacity for ethical reflexivity.

References

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Read the Full Article

This introductory piece draws upon a more comprehensive theoretical article submitted for publication. The full unpublished article includes a comprehensive review of the moral injury literature; a detailed differentiation of moral injury from vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout; an integration of novel and classic psychodramatic concepts with systemic concepts, such as double binds, feedback loops, homeostasis, and organisational change; figures pertaining to a proposed psychodramatic and systemic model of moral repair; and a complete reference list.

Bring your experience and join the unfolding conversation with Claudia at her Moral Injury workshop at BPA Wellspring Conference 2026 in Harrogate

Claudia Vau is running a workshop on Moral Injury at the BPA Psychodrama and Sociodrama Conference 2026 — *Wellspring: Re-sourcing Ourselves and Our Collective* — at The Old Swan Hotel, Harrogate, on Sunday 2 August 2026 (Session E3, 9:00–11:00am). This workshop is a reflective practice opportunity, to explore the interplay between concepts and lived experiences, promoting movement from moral injury to moral repair in action.

The full conference programme is available here: psychodrama.org.uk/bpa-conference-programme-2026

Claudia Vau Professional Profile

Psychodrama Psychotherapist in Private Practice in London and Kent, United Kingdom, with 12 years of clinical experience in the National Health Service (NHS), prisons, schools, disability and bereavement charities, and private companies providing eating disorders treatment and residential drug addiction rehabilitation services. Claudia Vau is a published author, and she received an Anne Bannister Award in 2014, for creative therapeutic work with children and youth.

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