**Review of Marcus Stueck’s Pandemic Management Theory by Rupert Meese.**

What do we know about the pattern of ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic affected people across the world?  Clearly there was a huge range of different experiences but in developing Pandemic Management Theory Dr. Marcus Stueck has taken a biocentric approach to understanding and describing the patterns and what we can learn from them.

In his recently published paper in the academic journal “Health Psychology Report'' he presents a theory modelling the kinds of challenges the pandemic has brought to people's mental health and wellbeing alongside the mechanisms and actions that have helped people turn from trauma into growth and expansion.  Dr. Stueck describes this property of taking a challenge and using it as the trigger to a new stage of growth in the personality as an ‘autopoietic leap’ - crediting Rolando Toro for coining the term ‘autopoiesis’ for the system’s propensity and drive towards health and expansion.

For those of us in the Biodanza community we must take the opportunity to appreciate with gratitude the work of Markus Stueck.  With more than twenty published papers to his name, this once again references four works of Rolando Toro and continues to give Biodanza and the biocentric principle it is founded upon a rigorous, solid and growing academic basis.

Pandemic Management Theory is built on data from 1500 participants across five continents.  With interviews and questionnaires starting just a few days after the initial lockdowns in Germany, and continuing over the period of the Covid-19 crisis.

The theory describes seven phases of psychological response to the conditions of the pandemic.  The path through these seven phases can lead to psychological damage and injury, or equally to greater health and wellbeing.  Dr Stueck outlines the actions, behaviours, attitudes and ways of thought that give positive guidance through a pandemic and support the autopoietic leap.

One of the most interesting results is that for many who were able or fortunate enough to form positive experiences or growth, that growth resulted in a greater shift from an ‘anthropomorphic’ world view to a ‘biocentric’ view.  The paper takes the time to describe the differences - that an anthropomorphic view sees humans at the centre; with hierarchy of resources below - where as a biocentric view sees humans as part of the living system - part of the web that must be valued in its own right as the field of which we are part.  There is a very strong call in the paper to make this shift in perspective across the board, in political as well as academic and resource management thinking.

The seven phases of the theory are:

1) The attempt to deal with the conditions of the pandemic using current resources, thinking and ways of understanding the world.  The assessment of the burdens of pandemic - as threat, overwhelm, frustration or challenge arousing curiosity.  The way in which the ‘loads’ or ‘burdens’ of the pandemic are thought of has a profound effect on the experience - for better or worse.

2) Adaptation using existing coping strategies.

3) Acute consequences.  If and when the burden cannot be coped with using existing understanding and strategies this triggers an ‘emergency’ signal.  Often leading to fear, uncertainty, anger, helplessness and sadness, which in turn may lead to fatigue, monotony, annoyance, stress and anxiety.

4) Chronic symptoms.  If the acute emergency signals are not managed then over a period of time chronic states may develop - of fatigue, psychosomatic disorder, failure of self-esteem, and so on.  Dr Stueck states that these negative consequences in phase three and four can be seen in measurements of skin resistance and hormone states.

5) Onset of illness.  Again, if the negative conditions are prolonged further then illness develops - the symptoms of which are ‘compensation phenomena’ for the disease-causing living conditions.

6) Positive effects.  If positive coping experiences and load interpretations can be supported then the pandemic can also lead to positive effects.  Interpreting the conditions as a challenge with the ‘curiosity reaction’ can be a turning point towards healthy self-regulation.  Self-efficacy, psychosocial support, optimism, and the reduction of internal tension are all factors that support this path.  The paper points out here that illness is best thought of as a process rather than a state.

7) The next sustainable biocentric development.  In this phase, the ‘autopoietic leap’, can be seen happening as a result of the crisis.  In these leaps the possibility for longer lasting psychological changes or changes to ethical attitudes can be found.  In this stage (as well as others), actions to support moving towards greater health, rather than lesser, are important.  Dr Stueck quotes the increase in wellbeing, mood changes and ethical life values from Biodanza as such a support.

The significant call to the government for action comes in the section entitled “Dealing with Negative Consequences of Pandemic Burden and Loads”.  Here Dr Stueck gives a list of ‘concrete preventative measures’ that can be proposed by governments.  This list includes: honest and scientifically based communication of risk (without unrealistic assurances); psychological first aid for healthcare staff; free and effective patient monitoring; protection for vulnerable groups.  Of most interest from a Biodanza perspective it includes “Social and psychosocial support” as a key recommendation.  “Increasing social participation leads to an improvement in social trust” (under threat in a pandemic).

While the seven phases of Pandemic Management Theory give a framework to the experiences of the pandemic, the theory also describes a “Biocentric Core” through which ‘fields of action’ can support and promote wellbeing given the loads and burdens of the seven phases.

“The biocentric approach is based on [the feeling of] being part of the complex of all living beings [...] based on affective experiences and encounters in feedback.  This affective, loving and empathetic connection to oneself, to others, and to the living community [...] has to be done both in a group context together with others [...] by using the body-oriented, non-verbal [...] field interventions.”  Clearly the practice of Biodanza fits this requirement.

The six effective biocentric fields of action during and after a pandemic are:

1. Keeping active communication through social and family connections etc.
2. Keeping physically active and lively.
3. Maintaining a connection with one’s inner self-reflection.
4. Building the sense of life and expression of life’s potentials.
5. Expanding consciousness of one’s place in the wholeness.
6. Developing sustainable biocentric lifestyles and attitudes.

While on the face of it these might seem trivial, or at least easy to say, the depth and significance of them will not be lost on Biodanza teachers whose craft is to transform these values from words into the realm of the directly experienced, embodied and deeply known.

The paper discusses the challenges faced to the vital functioning of the identity during a pandemic where identification with external elements (work, family, sports etc.) are severely restricted.  Here the importance of a healthy relationship to self-actualisation and the instincts is emphasised.  The fears that arose during the pandemic had and have a dissociating effect on all levels - between the immune system and nervous system; between the instincts and behaviour; between stimulation and activity; and in the desire for connection to others.  Touch, a basic human need, plays a significant role in repairing these dissociations with its meanings of communication, security, trust and relationship.  However, the fears prevalent in the pandemic also amplified fear of touch (55% of respondents reporting fear of being touched by others).  Fear boundaries create disconnections from the biocentric core and essential life processes.  Dr Stueck cites Rolando Toro’s request to face these fears in order to stay in contact with life.

Biocentric action fields such as Biodanza play a key role in superseding the biocentric limits that prevent people from adapting to life and venturing into the zone of the next development.  They help overcome pathologies such as a lack of self-love; inhibitions in expressing oneself; difficulties on contact; devaluation or intolerance of others; egocentrism; hyper and hypo sensitivity; exhaustion; depression; hyperactivity; dysregulation; physical dissociations head (thinking), chest (feeling), arms (action) etc. and social dissociations such as lack of transparency, manipulation, morals and ethics, the sacred and profane.   Where these biocentric limits are in place there is an impact on the person’s attitude to life, wellbeing, mental and physical health, with consequences in depression, hyperactivity, exhaustion, and susceptibility to infection through the suppression of the immune system.

As we start to move beyond the most severe impacts of the pandemic it is clear that the work to repair, recover, reclaim and fortify our communities from this biocentric perspective is just beginning.

The original paper can be found on the Biodanza Association UK website or via the publisher with the following reference:

Stueck, M. (2021). The Pandemic Management Theory. COVID-19 and biocentric development.

Health Psychology Report. https://doi.org/10.5114/hpr.2021.103123