
Critical realism, mimetic theory and social work

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jsw**Stan Houston** 

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Abstract

- **Summary:** Scapegoating is a ubiquitous, yet pernicious, phenomenon in today's world. It manifests in innumerable ways. Social work, in line with its emancipatory value-base, seeks to engage with various scapegoated groups to challenge the experience. In this article, the authors draw on critical realism and mimetic theory to elucidate the causative mechanisms fuelling scapegoating. This is done in order to heighten social workers' insight into the process and empower targeted groups.
- **Findings:** Mimetic theory highlights that scapegoating is a product of desire, rivalry and deflection. These are deep-seated mechanisms that are compatible with critical realist ontology and its search for causative properties in the social world. It is argued that critical realism augments mimetic theory by setting it within a much wider and deeper context of understanding. As such, it emphasizes intersecting causes and contingencies such as the role of temporal and spatial factors shaping the scapegoating experience.
- **Applications:** Social workers can transform these theoretical insights into sensitizing constructs when they facilitate self-directed groupwork with scapegoated groups. Being theoretically informed, they can pose critical questions to group members to assist them to make the link between personal problems and political issues. The aim is to empower these groups so that they can embrace the sociological imagination and act for change.

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Introduction

Without doubt, human relations across time and place have been tarnished by the exclusion of certain groups in society: scapegoating them in ways that jolt more progressive, pro-social predispositions. This observation chimes with Twain's remark that "the very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice" (1992, p. 57). Lamentably, these nefarious practices continue unabated in the modern world almost becoming the *Zeitgeist* of our times, bringing the salience of anti-oppressive social work practice into a much sharper focus. Hence, subaltern religious castes are de-humanized through exploitation and hate crimes; welfare claimants are admonished for being "work shy, chavs" whose profligate inclinations drain the public purse; indigenous and religious minorities are seen to promote norms and practices that threaten so-called, progressive, Western, liberal values; social media reports and twitter accounts shun specific racial groups, blaming them for causing global pandemics; and people identifying with alternative sexual identities are excoriated for initiating a moral decline in society.

In his landmark text on scapegoating, Douglas (1995) shows how this ubiquitous form of exclusion permeates wide-ranging contexts of human experience, extending from the practices within various religions to the everyday communications within family life. In other words, the transfer of blame has always been an inexorable part of us. Notably, for Douglas, it has become increasingly prevalent in modern life, making scapegoating a master, explanatory concept for social workers promoting social justice.

Social workers, too, have been targeted for this kind of opprobrium. Usually in the wake of a moral panic about violence in family life, they have been portrayed as credulous do-gooders, inept bureaucrats or unruly child kidnappers. Sharon Shoemith's (2016) egregious experience of professional scapegoating following the death of Baby "P" was a case in point. Her analysis of being lampooned by the press and public revealed how her sacking as Director of Haringey Children's Services was intended to deflect blame from the ruling political establishment at the time. In a complementary text on the death of Baby P, Jones (2014) recounted the spectacle of hard-working Council staff falling prey to calculative, power-politics and media hyperbole: an example of how power worked against social workers and the vulnerable. Ruch et al. (2014) also referred to the event arguing that reform of the child protection system would be stymied unless the social work profession developed a cogent understanding of the dynamics of scapegoating including its psychoanalytical components (Cooper, 2018).

Part of social work's *raison d'être* is to tackle scapegoating and empower the groups it targets (Douglas, 2000). In doing so, it aspires to engage with the "personal" and "political" spheres of life to develop what Mills (2000) referred to as the "sociological imagination, p. 45." One way for social workers to deepen this faculty is to draw on a philosophical position in the social sciences known as critical realism (Frauley & Pearce, 2007). In setting out a novel understanding of ontology (the nature of our being in the world), epistemology (how we come to know the social world) and axiology (how to define values and ethics), this meta-theory empowers the social worker to locate and unseat deep-seated, misanthropic mechanisms such as scapegoating.

In this article, we firstly present an overview of the central tenets of critical realism. The uniqueness of generative mechanisms within critical realism is underscored as the philosophy's central contribution to emancipatory social work praxis. The authors then argue that social workers must earnestly locate these mechanisms, particularly those causing phenomena such as scapegoating, by utilizing a process of retroduction. This is a mode of inquiry that draws on relevant theories in the social sciences to pinpoint salient, generative mechanisms affecting social life.

The second part of the article introduces the reader to a theory that fits with critical realist precepts and its retroductive search for generative mechanisms: that is, René Girard's (1965, 1977, 1989) conceptualization of *mimetic desire*. Girard suggested that the ubiquitous experience of scapegoating, which has been investigated intently by cultural anthropologists, and that has been illustrated redolently in art, film, and fiction, can be explained by the inescapable human tendency to emulate another person's desires. Mimetic desire, according to Girard, acts like an inexorable *mechanism* within human culture shaping our mental states, our intentionality and phenomenology.

Mimetic desire is a primary example of a generative mechanism as defined by critical realism. It casts a unique and discerning light on scapegoating as a prevailing occurrence in social life, irrespective of time, place and culture. Hence, the following review of Girard's work alongside critical realism is merited especially as the social work academy has given it insufficient attention. The article concludes by considering the implications of these combined theoretical insights for emancipatory social work practice with scapegoated groups.

Critical realism: A concise overview

In this section, we rehearse the central tenets of critical realism. Of necessity, this is an abbreviated account because the philosophy's range, depth and scope cannot be covered in such a confined space. Some of the most conspicuous figures in the annals of critical realist thinking are Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Sayer and Rom Harré. It will be mainly Bhaskar's (1998) work that we address in what follows. A number of related areas in his *oeuvre* are summarized, namely (i) the interplay between agency and structure; (ii) the three levels of reality; (iii) reality as compromising

open systems and generative mechanisms; (iv) emancipatory realism and (v) unearthing oppressive mechanisms. These areas are the fundamental building blocks of the philosophy and provide the edifice for the later consideration of memetic desire and emancipatory social work.

The interplay between agency and structure

Similar in many ways to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) well-received "social construction of reality" thesis, critical realism postulates that the social world comprises human agency (typically, agents' foresight, capacity to choose and self-regulate and exercise self-control) in juxtaposition with the impact of social structures (that is, enduring patterns within social life, including social rules, customs and arranged roles). To understand social life, we must realize the interaction between these two principal domains. Bhaskar argues that the world is fundamentally real: there are tangible social structures that are replicated over time through socialization, power and hegemonic ideology. Nonetheless, this progression does not prevent actors from socially constructing their experience through discourse and social interaction.

So, in the main, human agents are not yielding, passive or inept automata. They are shaped by social structure but also transform or modify it through their reflexive, creative actions. Mental states evince motives and reasons. Intentionality shapes inner conversations and behaviour. The exercise of rational, deliberative choice and purposeful behaviour indicates a calculative dimension within human agency.

The three levels of reality: Empirical, actual and causal

Bhaskar proposes that there are three levels of reality: the *empirical* level encompassing observed events; the *actual* level, incorporating all events whether a person encounters them or not and finally, the *causal* level embracing the unnoticed generative mechanisms which create discernible events in the social world. This tripartite configuration is the centrepiece of the philosophy. It is the last level, however, which takes on a particular purchase in critical realism. Even though the causal level of reality may not be open to direct perception, it is nonetheless existent because it gives rise to conspicuous effects. We cannot see the generative mechanism of magnetism, for instance, but we can observe its influences: how it patterns an assemblage of iron filings spread randomly on a page (Houston, 2001a).

Let us consider another example. We are out walking in the countryside and notice how leaves are falling to the ground. What we see happening is at the empirical level. However, the act of going in doors and losing sight of the outer environment does not prevent the leaves from tumbling down. This scenario happens at the actual level of reality. Finally, at the causal level of reality, we might query what underlying process, or causal power, is at work to generate this

autumnal phenomenon. A credible guess would be the mechanism of gravity (Houston, 2001a).

While we can formulate reasonably accurate hypotheses and theories about causality (as the previous examples reveal), our take on this real world will never be fully accurate or a precise mirror-image: it is at best an informed guess, an intelligent inference, which can evolve later to give an even more exact conceptualization of the phenomenon registering with our senses. Yet, our epistemology will always remain contingent, fallibilist and incipient.

Reality as comprising open systems and generative mechanisms

Critical realism opines that the social world encompasses innumerable, bio-psychosocial, interlacing systems. Each system contains its own unique generative mechanisms or causal properties. Crucially, they are actual entities that cause observable events (Blom & Morén, 2011). Human attachment is an example of a primary psychological mechanism. We are unable to directly see it, but its effects register in the empirical world when we perceive the warm interaction between a caregiver and her child. Similarly, commodification is an instance of a major economic mechanism shaping human relations under capitalism. Again, we can only view its effects as, for example, in the way the market turns human subjects into objects with a purchase value. Credible theories throw up myriads of other cases of these causal powers. Mimetic desire, which we explore below, is one that resonates with piquancy because of the toll of suffering it engenders. Identifying and understanding the nature of the mechanism is crucial, particularly if we are seeking to subvert it. Activism is potentiated by theoretical understanding.

Emancipatory realism

According to critical realism, the social scientist is rarely value-free, neutral, detached or distanced. Many facts have ethical connotations, provided we are cautious when making this normative extrapolation. "Ought" will often be the corollary of "is." Thus, if we discover harmful or preternatural mechanisms through our investigations, there is an obligation to challenge them. For example, uncovering generative mechanisms such as patriarchy, racism or ableism is not the same as finding an indeterminate, gravitational force in a physics experiment. Facts prompt values because in the social sciences we deal with "meaning," human biography, narratives, the unfolding life-course and social differences. This argument is congruent with a Marxist stance. In the "*Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach*," Marx (1998) critiqued philosophers for merely seeking to understand the social world, when the point was to change it. Exposing the role of the market, its commodifying, divisive and exploitative effects, was central to Marx's *oeuvre*. Turning a blind eye or adopting an apolitical stance is not an option. In doing nothing, we inadvertently give support to the status quo. Such is the myth of being

“value-free.” Theoretical explanation in the Marxist tradition is the platform for emancipatory praxis, for a changed order replacing capitalism.

Unearthing oppressive mechanisms

As previously enunciated, ascertaining causality in social life is a complex, multi-faceted endeavour much like attempting to unravel a Gordian knot. Fortunately, critical realism offers an exploratory procedure to assist the inquirer to identify the relevant generative mechanisms at play. Retroduction, as it is termed, differs from the two more commonly known approaches in social research: deduction and induction. The former refers to the inference from the general to the particular. The latter starts with the particular and then extrapolates to the general. Retroduction, by way of contrast, refers to a description of some phenomenon and then seeks to identify the generative mechanism(s) that produce it.

Retroduction is programmatic in that it sets out several investigative steps. At the outset, the inquirer follows Kant’s approach of asking a transcendental question concerning the phenomena under scrutiny. It takes the following form: “what must be the case for events to occur as they do?” Put differently, we are really asking what deep-level properties and mechanisms must be in place to make an event in the observable world happen. For example, a child shows a separation anxiety when her caregiver leaves the room, so we want to know what underpinning psychosocial mechanisms might have been activated to generate this response.

To make an intelligent rejoinder to the transcendental question requires some erudite, theoretical guesswork. More specifically, it is a matter of constructing a priori hypotheses to explain the observed effects. Hypotheses are developed by forming logical inferences. They are also conceived by considering statistical patterns, qualitative data comprising the accounts of human subjects and, typically, relevant theories such as Girard’s theory of memetic desire and scapegoating (see below).

Once hypotheses have been evinced, the next step in retroduction is to establish their credibility, a process referred to as judgemental rationality. If a specific hypothesis is tenable, there should be evidence of its effects in the empirical world. Hence, if the mechanism of commodification was shaping human social service delivery in a neoliberal order, then we should see its effects: privatization, means-testing, co-production, welfare retrenchment and a business model. Equally, the evidence may not be there to support the hypothesis. In the example provided, co-production may only exist at rhetorical level. Real-life relations may reflect more traditional ways of delivering care. In all of this, the search for evidence should be fastidiously executed. We should reach a point where there is a laudable connection between the hypothesis and the patterns of social activity observable in the empirical world. If this stage is reached, the researcher is then able to return to the original transcendental question and answer it with tentative assurance.

To conclude this section, let us briefly review how several social work commentators have drawn on these ideas. This corpus of work is growing. Critical realism is spurring attention within the international social work academy, both in terms of theoretical outpourings and empirical work. We can locate this literature within an emergent typology comprising the following categories: “practice development”; “contributions to research” and “philosophical considerations.”

On the practice development front, to take the first category, there are some examples to note. In one article (Houston, 2001b), the lead author reflected on risk in child welfare from a critical realist stance. In a second publication, he looked, more generally, at how critical realism contributed to various aspects of social work practice including anti-oppressive practice (Houston, 2001a). However, for the authors, it was Blom and Morén’s (2010) innovative “CAIMeR” model that stood out in this category. This model offered a conceptual framework for analysing social work practice within an agency setting and stipulated how generative mechanisms, context and type of intervention shaped outcomes at different levels. The contribution was distinctly original and pragmatic in the way it applied theory to practice.

The second category, dealing with social work research, divided into debates about research method (Craig & Bigby, 2015; Houston, 2010; Oliver, 2012) and descriptions of empirical work applying critical realist ideas in research design (Herrero & Charnley, 2019; North, 2019). Oliver’s work, an example of the former, was significant because it addressed a recognized lacuna in critical realism: its limited consideration of applied research methods. The author responded to this omission by making a credible case for critical realist grounded theory. This was achieved by using critical realist ideas (on the nature of agency, structure and emancipation) to amplify the inductive process lying at the heart of grounded theory. Oliver’s work is helpful in that it shows how critical realism can act an *under labourer* facilitating synthesis, complementary understandings and synergies between different concepts and methods.

In the next category, we see a decisive change in orientation towards philosophical deliberations on critical realism and social work. These outputs covered epistemological considerations (Houston, 2001b; Longhofer & Floersch, 2012; Mäntysaari, 2005) and ontological questions – such as explaining human change (Morén & Blom, 2003). There were also discursive reflections acknowledging the social construction of knowledge, human agency, structural barriers and opportunities for emancipation. Interestingly, McNeill and Nicholas (2019) employed critical realism as an emancipatory epistemology enlightening critical social work research and practice with groups facing structural inequalities. Here, they made links with evidence-based and anti-oppressive practice.

Arguably, an underpinning clarion call unites this corpus of work: if we are to take emancipatory social work seriously, we would do well to view the social world through the lens of critical realism. More specifically, the quest to identify pertinent generative mechanisms causing human oppression must lie at the heart of this endeavour. Taking up this injunction, the next section outlines the work of René

Girard and his theory of memetic desire. To reiterate, memetic desire can be viewed as a primary example of a generative mechanism according to how it is conceptualized by critical realism. This a significant causal power in human culture, one that has relevance for emancipatory social work with scapegoated groups.

Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoating mechanism

The practice of scapegoating has received much academic scrutiny. Anthropologists, such as Fraser (1923), have linked it with magical rituals and sacrifice; sociological studies (Shenassa, 2001) have examined its embeddedness in social interaction; psychoanalytical accounts (Cooper, 2018) explain the phenomenon as a form of projection of repressed feeling and organizational theorists (Cooke, 2007) view scapegoating as fulfilling strategic, expressive and instrumental functions within organizations. A common perception, across these diverse approaches, is that scapegoating delivers a prophylactic function for a social group: deflecting blame and unease, to restore group harmony and cohesion (Douglas, 2000).

Within this corpus or work, René Girard's anthropological theory has made a pivotal contribution to our understanding of scapegoating (Ruch et al., 2014). However, to date, it has been given scant attention by the social work academy. Central to Girard's theory were two interconnected observations about human relations within cultural groups, explicitly (i) the rife nature of mimetic desire and (ii) the ubiquity of scapegoating. For Girard, they have a substantive presence in human affairs (both past and present) and compare with Proust's notion of primordial "psychological laws." In critical realist parlance, they are generative mechanisms operating at the causal level of reality.

It was in his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965), that Girard evinced the notion of mimetic desire. In this text, he characterized it as an inimitable drive within subjects. In short, it suggested that we seek to imitate others. It is so pervasive that it happens at the level of phylogeny (the evolution of the species over time) and ontogeny (during an individual's life span). Indeed, Girard traced the prevalence of this mechanism in ancient myth, legend, literature and religion. Critically, because it is so ingrained within (un)consciousness, we take it for granted.

While the mimicry of others can be wide-ranging, it focuses on what other people *want*, claims Girard. To put this prosaically, we want things because people in our circle also want them. Thus, a child imitates her parents' and peers' desired goods, aspirations, achievements and cultural capital. Likewise, within a social group, the process of emulation focuses on objects commonly sought. It is also prevalent in work environments. When the workforce prizes rank, status, promotion, expertise, leadership and monetary reward, this

compelling set of inducements shapes our internal motivation and aspirations when we join the firm. Mimesis is therefore covetous, subliminal and acculturated. This is a desire to feel existentially whole: we strive to be complete like the others around us. To acquire this wholeness, we must attain what they valorize. Desire is a longing to “be.”

Girard argues that particular individuals can stand out as objects for emulation. They can be distant figures or present within one’s social orbit. In terms of the former, celebrity culture throws up many examples; or perhaps admirable characters appear in various media outlets. A distant figure can also appear within fiction. Distant mimicry means the venerated and the sycophant may never have direct face-to-face contact. By way of contrast, the latter type of emulation might arise in environments where proximity is the norm: relationships between employer and the employee, mentor and mentee, teacher and pupil.

Girard suggests that mimetic desire, particularly in the context of close relations, inevitably leads to *mimetic rivalry*. When subjects chase after the same desired objects, and become more alike, an insidious competition can ensue. To complicate matters, there is often an inequitable distribution of the desired things and a mismatch between demand and supply. Scarcity intensifies the rivalry. Some individuals in the competitive pool acquire competitive advantages through nepotism, contacts, influence or knowing “how to play the system.” But pursuing a high-ranking position in an organization can lead to a competitive struggle dominated by a zero-sum game of a winner and losers. The unsuccessful applicants might feel some level of resentment when the outcome of the contest is revealed. The potential for intra-group conflict rises as a result.

The scapegoating mechanism (*Violence and the Sacred* (1977)) is the corollary to mimetic desire and rivalry. When mimetic rivalry becomes widespread and febrile, it can descend into a convulsion of violence to such an extent that the social order is endangered. This threat to social harmony must be remedied expeditiously because all will be affected deleteriously if it escalates. As a diversionary tactic, a scapegoat is identified and vilified. Collective projection and displacement transfer blame for the ills of the day onto a person or group. The scapegoat becomes culpable for the crisis and, by aiding such deflection, restores calm and order amongst the former bellicose antagonists. Accordingly, the scapegoat becomes a prophylactic untouchable. The factions are now reconciled in their condemnation of this threatening nemesis. Cultural integration and solidarity have been rescued from the precipice of anarchy.

Aligning critical realism and mimetic theory

To recapitulate, memetic desire, rivalry and scapegoating are primary examples of interlinked generative mechanisms as defined by critical realism. However, critical realism can reveal, through retroduction, that these mechanisms are not the only ones that impact on the scapegoated group. Some of these additional mechanisms (we can venture) might accentuate the impact of scapegoating while others

moderate it, and there may be some that contravene it. For example, in a group of scapegoated people, we may identify the impact of patriarchy. Women in the scapegoated group may face the added ignominy of sexism from the outside antagonists or even from members of the scapegoated group itself. Similar reflections apply to the generative mechanisms of ageism and heterosexism within scapegoated groups. Equally, there may be emancipatory mechanisms that, when activated, subvert scapegoating such as “psychological unmasking” and “psychological dissociation.” Unmasking enables scapegoated members to understand the psychosocial dynamics fuelling the process; dissociation aids people to detach from their shame and guilt and locate it with the perpetrators – it is a cathartic disowning process. Both mechanisms empower people to take up an activist stance.

Critical realism also highlights the importance of putting observable phenomena within a temporal and spatial context. These contexts influence the experience of being scapegoated. Thus, a group of Travellers reside in a setting that attracts hostile reactions from the surrounding community. They move to a new location. It is less repressive. But, two years later, the government of the day introduces oppressive legislation forcing the Travellers to transfer to a nearby community providing social housing. The move intensifies the excoriation. Time, place and generative mechanisms lead to palpable outcomes.

To make a final point, Girard said very little about the agency-structure conundrum. The scapegoated are presented as de facto passive recipients. But, according to critical realism, human agency is real: actors socially construct their experience, develop narratives about it and transform it. When working with scapegoated groups from an activist standpoint, we must understand their construction of the experience: this is a hermeneutic imperative within critical realism. Without this inquiry into meaning, empathy will be attenuated. Not only that, social activists can also empower scapegoated groups to re-narrate these constructions, dis-identify from them and move from a current to a preferred scenario. In this way, critical realism sets memetic desire within an agentic, emancipatory framework that is compatible with a pedagogical, consciousness-raising stance (Freire, 1972). The next section explores how the aforementioned ideas can be applied with scapegoated groups through a model of emancipatory groupwork.

Using theory to inform praxis

Not much has been written on social work intervention with scapegoated groups per se, addressing the unique nature of the group members’ experience and what has caused it based on a realist understanding of the social world. So, we need to look more widely to applicable models that can incorporate the theory presented earlier, particularly those that focus on the underlying *causes* of oppression. One such model is self-directed groupwork (Mullender et al., 2013). As the lead author has argued elsewhere (Houston, 2019), this is a well-conceived intervention with service users empowering them to act for change by understanding the nature of

oppression and the underlying generative mechanisms causing it. Below, we rehearse its stages and describe how they can be applied by scapegoated groups and the social workers supporting them.

Inherent within the self-directed model is a search for causation to determine *why* problems, such as scapegoating, occur – hence its compatibility with critical realist thinking and Girard’s anthropological method. Social workers can use their understanding of critical realism and mimetic theory here to sensitively pose relevant questions to the group to help them understand why they have been targeted. They can also use these theories to stimulate debate concerning the interplay between agency, culture and structure. Importantly, in this and at other stages of the groupwork process, the workers facilitate this questioning and learning process while respecting the group’s unique experience of the problem. As time progresses, social work involvement recedes.

In Stage 1 of the model, the “workers take stock.” This occurs before the group has been assembled. It is a planning and organizing stage. It involves exploring the underlying principles and approach to facilitation while building a co-worker team. The workers should also take stock of relevant theories such as the body of theory presented earlier to enable them to “tune-in” accurately to the phenomenon of scapegoating. For instance, the notion of open systems and generative mechanisms within critical realism enables the workers to think widely and deeply about the scapegoating experience, and how different temporal and spatial factors may affect it. Theory can also engender sensitizing concepts which can be used by the workers to adroitly probe experience and steer discussion with group members without imposing sacrosanct ideas. Moreover, they can be used by the facilitator/worker to open lines of inquiry. Sensitizing concepts are preliminary, starting points for building analysis rather than definitive culminations that circumvent it.

Applying retroduction at this early stage helps clarify what causal factors *might* be at play in addition to those revealed by mimetic theory. In taking stock, the workers also begin to embrace the sociological imagination, linking personal problems to public issues. Such initial reflections must be embraced cautiously, though, because they may not fully represent the group’s actual experience (if at all). The latter has primacy in self-directed groupwork. Any thoughts derived from explanatory theory must have the status of tentative hypotheses. Yet, critical realism and mimetic theory can provide the workers with a preliminary empathy for the scapegoated group. Because it is never possible to be a-theoretical bystanders who fully bracket their presumptions, it is best to proceed from the base of credible, acknowledged theories in the social sciences.

The second stage sees the “group taking off.” At this point, the professionals engage with the group members as partners. Through open discussion, allowing all to speak, the group clarifies what needs to be tackled. Norms, ground rules, roles and responsibilities are agreed. The group is launched and established. At this very early stage, group members can be introduced to the notions of retroduction, causality and the three levels of reality but in a tentative, exploratory and non-doctrinaire way. The three levels of reality (propounded by critical realism) convey

that scapegoating may not be an arbitrary occurrence but rather one that is fuelled by a range of unseen factors which nevertheless cause undue suffering.

The group is now at a point when they are “prepared to take action.” This is the third stage. It is critical because this is the juncture when the group considers in depth “what” the issues are, “why” scapegoating occurs as a social phenomenon and “how” emancipatory change can be implemented. Preparing to take action therefore requires analysis, and this can be heightened by the workers’ knowledge and experience, provided it is conveyed prudently and measured in its delivery. The “why” question, in particular, creates a conceptual opening in which the workers can pose relevant questions to the group; encourage them to think about creative ways at looking at the problem; help the members consider the root causes of the problem; enable the group to make the link between the “personal” and “political” dimensions of their experience and prompt thinking about how to tackle the problem through social activism.

Again, providing real-life examples of oppressive mechanisms, such as mimetic desire, furthers comprehension. However, workers should not fall into the trap of “banking” ideas into passive recipients: group members must be active participants in relating ideas to their own experience and questioning their applicability. Indeed, group members may well have their own thoughts about causative processes: they are by no means a *tabula rasa*. Adducing inductive, grounded, situated knowledge is the primary aim when responding to the “why” question. Critical pedagogy awakens this awareness through judicious dialogue. According to Mullender et al. (2013, p. 105), comprehending the “why” question is imperative. As they say, “without it, there can be no awareness of wider scale oppression, no movement beyond blaming oneself for one’s problems into greater awareness and the pursuit of social change.” To omit the “why” question and move precipitously from the “what” to the “how” can lead to a shallow, unapprised, ineffectual form of activism. The “why” question indispensably moves analysis from “surface” to “depth.”

In the fourth stage, the group starts to act for change. Critical realism’s position on the agency-structure issue is helpful here, reminding both the workers and group members that consciousness, dialogue and creative thinking are potent tools in planning how to overcome structural barriers. For Freire (1972), “the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation” (p. 31). Praxis is a product of the agent’s sociological imagination. By using it, a person can identify disabling mechanisms such as mimetic rivalry and mimetic desire through the agentic practice of retroduction. Campaigning, lobbying, advocacy and alliance-building are forms of praxis that emanate from a developed sense of agentic-personhood. Furthermore, critical realism reminds workers and group members that change, and praxis are affected by temporal and spatial factors.

In the last stage of the model, the group takes over. Typically, aims and strategies are reviewed to ascertain what has worked. As part of this process, group members return to the “what,” “why” and “how” questions. This is a matter of

reflecting to refashion the future. Gaining insight into the scapegoating mechanisms, whether they are apprised through mimetic theory, or sourced through other considerations, lifts the veil on malign projection and displacement, relieving group members from the cauldron of contemptibility.

The next section outlines an example of how the foregoing, schematic and programmatic stages can be contextualized and applied practically with a societal group that have been historically vilified and scapegoated.

Critical realism, mimetic theory and self-directed groupwork with Roma citizens

In this example, social work facilitators seek to empower a group of Roma citizens by applying the self-directed groupwork model. According to Kemp (2002), this minority, ethnic group experience continuing discrimination and exclusion throughout Europe and elsewhere. Typically, they have been scapegoated for being unproductive members of the community, particularly at times of economic crisis. Relatedly, one prominent commentator contended that:

The Roma were the outsiders used as scapegoats when things went wrong and the locals did not want to take responsibility. The methods of repression have varied over time and have included enslavement, enforced assimilation, expulsion, internment and mass killings.

Pointedly, Scheeweis (2011) refers to the complex, multi-generational filaments of stereotyping that Roma communities encounter, regardless of the national context in which they live. Some research studies have shown that social workers, too, fail to comprehend this insidious process due to ignorance, prejudice and a lack of appreciation for Gypsy, Traveller and Roma cultures (Cemlyn, 1998; Garrett, 2005; Power, 2004).

It is contended that critical realism and mimetic theory can shed light on this complicated and unique form of “othering.” More specifically, there are four main ways in which critical realism and mimetic theory can supplement and inform the WHY and other stages of self-directed groupwork with communities such as the Roma. They are: (a) consciousness raising and problematizing experience; (b) positive role-modelling; (c) promoting awareness of internal group dynamics and (d) implementing action strategies.

Consciousness raising

Importantly, Girard’s ideas on the scapegoating mechanism can be considered at the WHY stage of the model, through consciousness-raising and problematizing strategies. This understanding can be used to obviate self-blame, psychological reductionism and the individualization of social problems, by showing how the oppression is linked to wider social processes beyond the influence of the Roma

themselves. Conspicuously, Roma communities have been targeted for censure in the wake of neoliberal austerity measures, and the social tensions they have caused (Themelis, 2016). They have also suffered under rising right-wing nationalism which seeks to project blame on minority groups. Political events, socioeconomic conditions and the “misery of the many” have thrust the Roma from silent marginality to limelight ostracization (Nacu, 2012). The WHY stage of self-directed groupwork can illuminate these oppressive generative mechanisms, showing (in line with a critical realist ontology) how they have causal effects.

This process of consciousness raising can commence by helping the group to collectively examine their experiences of scapegoating. This can be structured around critical incidents, such as episodes of hate speech, which research (Kapralski, 2016) indicates are commonplace for Roma communities across Europe. In doing so, group members can begin to see the commonality defining their experiences, how the scapegoating of Roma groups may have communal roots, antecedents, patterns, linkages and effects. These can operate at the level of the “causal” level of reality (Bhaskar, 1998) where generative mechanisms that screen for cultural purity and danger classify Roma peoples as pollutants (Douglas, 1966). Such commonality can generate a sense of solidarity within the group. It leads to a sense that “I am not alone, in my experience of oppression.” Within this common exploration of being a scapegoat, the members are enabled to understand that there is a defining social context explaining their predicament.

Moreover, with the help of the social work facilitators, they can formulate working hypothesis about their experiences using Girard’s ideas, and the critical realist precepts undergirding it, as a lens to view the impact of this wider social context. Retroductive hypothesizing, in this way, generates questions such as: “whose interests are being served when the scapegoating mechanism has been activated?” Equally, “whose interests are being threatened?” “Does scapegoating serve some societal purpose?” “Can mimesis be located as a causative mechanism in how the group experience being othered?” Such questions can reveal vested political interests that serve to displace blame onto Roma communities (Kovarek et al, 2017). Critical realism helps to identify the complex, interwoven, causal drivers that are relevant to comprehending the unique nature of scapegoating as faced by Roma communities (Batueva, 2011).

Positive role-modelling

Girard’s insights into mimesis and the scapegoating mechanism have implications for the identification and contribution of role models both within and outside the self-directed group. If we are unwittingly and inextricably subject to others’ influence, then groups must reflect on the nature of that influence, and seek mentors that provide sources of inspiration, particularly when the group is facing any form of hardship. Clearly, this means that the social work facilitators have a moral duty at the outset to model the right kind of emancipatory values, knowledge and skill to enable the group to “take off,” in Mullender et al.’s (2013) terms. Acting as role

models, the facilitators must avoid the trappings of co-dependency, the cult of a charismatic personality, elitism and paternalistic styles of engagement. Essentially, professional role models must help uncover what is already there, as group members are experts in their own lives.

Clearly, it is preferred that role models emerge, organically, within the group itself, particularly at the second stage of self-directed groupwork where “the group takes off.” These group members may become leaders, but not in an autocratic sense. Ideally, as leaders they are committed to facilitation rather than control by diktat. The use of power is enabling (rather than constraining) and reflects a “power-with” as opposed to a “power-over” stratagem. Role models must create a safe ambience within the group so that members can express their views, narratives and opinions. In all of this, leaders presenting as role models, whether professional or not, need to encourage (mimetic) desires that are philanthropic, pro-social and that aim for human betterment. The danger of lapsing into insidious competition is all too real for such leaders, but this threat can be minimized by understanding Girard’s theorization of group dynamics which we now consider.

Awareness of internal group dynamics

Building on the preceding theme, group members must remain vigilant and reflect on their relationships within the group. Vigilance emanates from an awareness of the potential presence and impact of mimetic desire within the group. There are certain desires present within all groups, such as the desire to be liked, listened to, empathized with and respected. None of these desires appears unreasonable or problematic: one can envisage situations where group members affirm and acknowledge each other as part of normal, reciprocal, everyday transactions. However, mimetic theory holds that all objects of desire, including innocuous or intangible ones, can become scarce commodities. A harmless desire, such as the yearning to be liked or to be popular within a group, can transform into a rivalrous longing to be liked the most.

Members of self-directed groups must therefore be reflexively aware of the human propensity to imitate others and the danger that could follow from this association. The competition and rivalry that can ensue from internal comparison can impact on the groups’ cohesion and disrupt the self-directed stages outlined above. More worryingly, the process has the potential to lead to scapegoating within the self-directed group itself. Hence, a scapegoated group replicates this injustice internally. Following on from this observation, group members should be sensitive to difference within the group (for example, in relation to personal or social characteristics) because, as Girard reminds us, difference can trigger the scapegoating mechanism. Crucially, group members should be alert to the acquisitive nature of this mechanism throughout each of the unfolding stages of self-directed groupwork. Imitation can lead to an avariciousness or a grasping obsession to gain the desired object, whether it be of symbolic or material

substance. Douglas (2000) argues that such processes must be confronted but also understood.

Action strategies

Members of self-directed groups should not be ensnared by the scapegoating process as they can take action for change: the final stage of self-directed groupwork. Crucially, they can instigate two primary forms of intervention to tackle the scapegoating mechanism when it has been unleashed. First, they can develop their capacity for political activism at regional and national levels. This aspect of the Roma experience has already been touched on. Primarily, these activists can cultivate *counter-narratives* to dominant societal stories about them and their social groups. Counter-narratives can be informed by Girardian and critical realist analyses of the oppression that they have experienced. Thus, Roma activists might want to highlight the highly competitive nature of relations within oppressor alignments and how they might seek to mask these dissonant tensions through stratagems of outward projection. For instance, during periods of prolonged economic decline, when competition for scarce resources is at a premium, scapegoating becomes most vociferous for Roma communities (Themelis, 2016). Scapegoated groups can enhance the influence of these counter-narratives by using websites, blogs and other forms of electronic media. The depth and credibility of the content of these forms of communication might be heightened by drawing on a Girardian examination of the group's direct experiences of persecution.

Second, Roma groups can be supported to lobby and engage with advocacy and human rights organizations to further their case. In this engagement, Roma members might buttress their arguments by re-framing their experience through a Girardian analysis. This may be of use to these organizations as they seek to represent the authentic experiences of the groups directly and correctly. When advocates become aware of the deep-seated causes of subjugation (through a critical realist understanding) they may be better placed to formulate more tenable forms of support and promotion. Notably, advocates can address the enforced settlement and assimilation of Roma communities (Scheeweis, 2011): two areas that breach human rights protocols. In all of this, Roma groups can be empowered through a pedagogy of active and participatory citizenship (Cemlyn & Ryder, 2016).

Conclusion

History testifies to the contention that human unconsciousness is organized like a lynching (Jameson, 1983). To comprehend why this may be the case, the authors instigated a conceptual journey starting from meta-theory, then moving to high-level anthropological theory, and arriving finally at a consideration of praxis. The emancipation of scapegoated groups was the axis around which the aforementioned deliberations revolved. The understanding of causality within this journey

has been a prominent area of consideration. Critical realism and mimetic theory helped to elucidate the nature of the relevant causal properties and powers affecting the scapegoating experience. Armed with this understanding, it was argued that social workers could approach self-directed groupwork feeling prepared and ready to take on the role of informed facilitators. But at this final juncture, let us remind ourselves why this effort is warranted. Scapegoating is a pervasive and pernicious branding of innocent people. It is one of the worst things we do to one another. Consequently, social workers must be equipped with the most discerning theory and apposite methods if they are to empower scapegoated groups to find solace in the sociological imagination.

Ethics

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