

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PSYCHODRAMA (Recent Thoughts)

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How do action methods work so as to provide therapeutic effects? I've been pondering this problem for over forty years: I've written about this on multiple occasions, most fully in 2000 in my 4th edition of *Foundations of Psychodrama*. But that was then and this is now, so this paper reflects my most current thinking.

To appreciate this problem, though, one must first understand that psychotherapy is highly complex and must be addressed through many frames of reference; that is, no single theory can suffice. This is true also regarding the illusion of seeking a single explanatory theory in the vast sphere of medicine as well as other fields. Associated theories of how health is maintained and what causes "sickness" themselves are complex, with biological, social, cultural, and historical influences, among others.

Anyway, psychodrama is more than a method of psychotherapy. It is a complex method for learning and exploring new types of problems, especially in the psycho-social realm. Psychodrama really has applications, then, in education, business, politics, religion, community building, and many other contexts. This article will then speak of the more general processes of consciousness-raising that transcend psychotherapy, and since psychiatric treatment may be a sub-set of consciousness-raising, it applies there, too.

Making Meta-Cognition Explicit

Meta-cognition is a fancy word for thinking about thinking, reflecting on thinking, assumptions. It's the core of cognitive therapy and many other approaches, including thinking about the way words have meanings deeper than their definitions (i.e., semantics), how images do also (i.e., semiotics), or actions in public (i.e., performance studies), and many other fields.

One of the more interesting features of psychodrama as therapy is that it makes meta-cognition more explicit: We are able to see not only the thoughts, but the ways, the directorial techniques, for bringing them out into the open. Thus, the psychodramatist adds a degree of teaching to the therapist-patient relationship! Most people have no idea how to systematically reflect on their own thinking. The directions given in the course of a psychodrama or action exploration exposes both the beliefs—the content—but equally important, the process by which people can re-think what they think!

For example, people in a group—the others as well as the protagonist—can see the activity of pausing and reflecting translated into action: Stopping a scene and adding a double, for example, brings into explicit awareness the idea that thinking about our deeper and unexpressed thoughts and feelings is a good thing to do. With that in mind, let's consider the deeper functions of the other principles and techniques of psychodrama.

Creativity

We are entering an era in which creativity is valued; it was not always thus. For much of human history creativity was sometimes tolerated, sometimes suppressed and when it was tolerated, it

certainly was not imagined to be a capacity that was widely distributed in the population or part of most educational institutions. Rather, knowledge was established by the ancients, and sometimes a bit by those who were highly accredited and authorized. New ideas were suspect, politically, religiously, socially. There are many elements in our culture that still preserve this inertia and suspicion, so talking about creativity as a potential in everyone remains emotionally loaded, edgy. People feel secure and familiar thinking along conventional lines and they take invitations to think creatively as threats to personal and cultural integrity.

Nevertheless the ideal of creativity is alluring, especially in the realm of psychotherapy. It's a complex world, and if the conventional "answers" would suffice, people would perhaps find it easier to "adjust." But the world is changing, and what worked years ago no longer works! Appealing to people who are caught up in their problems that their struggles might be viewed as creative challenges appeals to their pride in a positive way, instead of implying that they're stupid and lazy for not having done the "right thing," though today it is not easy to specify for another person what they "should" do so right and wrong is murky, and creativity opens to new possibilities. This is the theoretical and philosophical foundation of Moreno's vision. Spontaneity, drama, improvisation, group work, and the other techniques serve this general goal.

Spontaneity and Improvisation

The second foundation for psychodrama is that one of the most natural and common ways people create is by getting involved, experimenting, struggling, improvising, trying things out and when they don't work, trying something else. The mental attitude behind this process is spontaneity, a lively interest in seeing what else can be imagined. Spontaneity supports persistence in

improvising and opens the mind to inspirations and new ideas. In turn, exploring, the activity of improvising, generates more ideas and raises the "energy" of spontaneity. It should be noted, though, that spontaneity depends on a number of elements that may or may not be present. They should not be assumed to be present.

Group Support and Warming-Up

The mind is an exquisitely sensitive social organ and picks up even subliminal cues about whether those around one are supportive or hostile, enthusiastic or depressed. Morale is an important variable here, as is leadership. Is what is being considered or attempted possible? If the consensus is that it is not, morale sinks; if it is imagined to be probable, morale grows. Similarly, are one's efforts appreciated by others, enjoyed, encouraged? Spontaneity rises. Some of this is internalized, so that those involved have a carry-over from earlier battles, or early life. They have "spunk," resilience, optimism. These are important qualities that are not sufficiently acknowledged in many books on psychotherapy.

Play

In addition to raising group cohesion, another way to promote spontaneity is to make improvisation less dangerous, and the way we did this is to set up experiments in relatively fail-safe contexts. We call it pretend-play, and much of early learning happened within this context. There were edges of danger, but more important was social support: If the kids were climbing or balancing and they fell, more than avoiding physical pain, what was important was that their playmates laughed with them rather than at them. It was meant to be light-hearted, of

no real consequence. Mistakes didn't "count," and there was lots of room for "do-overs," for repeated attempts.

Not-nice-play, laced with teasing and put-downs, was correspondingly inhibiting to experimentation, spontaneity, and creativity. Competition and actions having un-fix-able consequences are less fun, more a matter of performance anxiety. Even though some call this play, and a few seem to enjoy it, it's far from the kind of emotional security that is most characteristic of the free-wheeling play of kids or the vitality of psychodrama.

Drama

One can exercise spontaneity in making music, dancing, art, and other contexts. Drama, though, allows for improvisation mixed with the consideration of psycho-social predicaments of some complexity. Here words are more important. I'm not talking about scripted, rehearsed performances for outside, relatively uninvolved audiences which has become the most officially prevalent avenues for traditional theatre. Rather, I'm talking about the mixture of enactment, role, and story and this can be both improvised and exploratory and this is what is involved in psychodrama. It's the psycho-social equivalent of the chemistry laboratory, only instead of flasks and test-tubes, we have the various "instruments" of drama main player (protagonist), supporting players (auxiliary egos), stage, director, audience, all have been modified a bit so as to facilitate the exploration of personal and collective predicaments (i.e., psychodramas and sociodramas).

Group Dynamics

Most ordinary verbal types of group therapy has been influenced by the psychoanalytic context which has several patients and one or two in the role of therapist. There isn't much diversification of role or function other than that. In psychodrama, a type of non-verbal as well as verbal group work, the roles are *more distributed*. The problem is elaborated by the main player, but this work is aided by the director, who facilitates the process. The main player is not saddled with the additional responsibility of trying to figure out what to do next it's all she can do just to stay focused on the issues involved. The supporting players empty themselves of their own personal concerns and for a while the time of the enactment open to being of service to the unfolding drama. They become the roles assigned by the main player in combination with the director. There is an exciting collective task going on, which generates more creativity, and this often contrasts to the far weightier type of group in which people are interacting and reflecting verbally which may be good, but then again doesn't partake of the collaborative creativity of psychodrama.

The Stage

Although the psychodrama stage, when built as an architectural structure, can add to the vividness and effectiveness of the process, it isn't absolutely necessary. What is needed, though, is an area designated in the room where what is done is considered to be provisional, not entirely real in the sense of every action "proving" something authentic about the players. Rather, it's a concretization of the idea of "surplus reality."

There is an invitation in the way the room is established that we think about problems at different levels—what actually happens, what might happen, and considering what else might happen. Off-

stage, there's warming up in the group, or re-warming-up as we re-think the scene just played. On-stage, we try out alternative ideas, try different enactments. On-stage is the laboratory, off-stage is the taking the data of the experience and "processing," thinking about what just happened. Often we'll get new ideas that merit going "on-stage" again, or encouraging another member of the group to take the stage and explore what's up for her at the moment.

The Techniques

Many psychodramatic techniques shift the variables of time, levels of disclosure, and other aspects of imagination so that we can examine the attitudes or behaviors that come up from other perspectives. What if we were to take it over? Can you do that? Sure, in psychodrama you can do lots of things. The potentials of imagination are constrained only by our lack of imagination! It's worth looking at the various psychodramatic techniques from a broader perspective, certainly beyond the specific issues being examined.

Doubling, for example, allows for the bringing into overt expression those thoughts or feelings that would not be confessed to in the course of ordinary conversation. They impose an artificial frame: What if we could really open the door beyond worries of being thought crazy or inappropriate, ungrateful or foolish, and we could admit openly thoughts that we were able to find the words for? Going further, what if others might find words for what eluded us, and even if they were mistaken, their efforts could help us to find what we meant by showing us what we did not mean!

Role reversal! We might not have thought of what our predicament might seem like in the minds

of the others involved! We are drawn into full maturity, withdrawing our childish sense of egocentricity. And being drawn into more multi-perspectival thinking is mind-expanding. It's a form of education, really.

Future projection: The director may invite the protagonist to imagine a future scene. This is not simple worrying: The idea is to more fully not only imagine but play out the protagonist's hopes and dreams. This is also what in professional training is called simulations. National military planners engage in military exercises that cost hundreds of millions of dollars do so they can find out what the potential mistakes might be. It's uncomfortable to engage in actually looking for what you might have overlooked, but, hey, again that's the way real grown-ups think. It's good for us pseudo-grown-ups to structure exercises where we can both indulge our fantasies and then replay a scene as it may more probably eventuate.

The opposite, though, is also interesting: We may have imagined a limited future the better to avoid being hurt but it's good to have the director ask, "Okay, what would be even more wonderful to imagine?" The protagonist is encouraged to dare to dream new dreams, as Moreno said he wanted people to do. Dare to envision what you want and by so doing, discover that indeed you want more. Don't automatically shut down way before you must. Sometimes a bit of reaching and imagining opens things up more.

Process is the Most Important Product

This play on a General Electric Company motto in the 1950s (i.e., "Progress is our most important product") may be the most relevant to reflective practice. In a number of ways, psychodrama

brings the implicit to the surface and makes it explicit—both the contents of the pre-conscious mind and the procedures whereby they are brought into awareness.

Role Theory: Using the concept of “role” as a unit of description makes for a user-friendly language, a way that most people who have watched movies, television, or theatre—i.e., just about everyone—a way of using the dramaturgical metaphor to frame and understand life’s situations. Shakespeare’s line, “All the world’s a stage...” (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7) epitomizes this metaphor. People understand it when you talk about roles.

The next step is the more explicit recognition that everyone is playing roles all the time, and when one knows that they are playing roles—playing in the sense of performing—they can then begin to play—in the sense of exploration—with the way they play their roles. This offers role distance, an opportunity for the inner director, the inner chooser, to re-decide to play this role more strongly or more subtly, this way more, that way less. Maybe a role will be pushed aside and another role substituted, such as instead of being the defeated one, one re-frames the situation to the heroic survivor.

The Roles in the Psychodrama: One begins to identify with oneself as a main player—Moreno called it the “protagonist,” but also there’s a partial and growing identification with the role of the director. If she can direct me, maybe I can do some of the same maneuvers on my own! It’s a powerful suggestion.

The role of the other—Moreno called these, the “auxiliary egos”—can also be played: the director says to the protagonist, “Show me how your brother said that.” Changing roles, warming up to

what it's like to be the other person, is the basis for a growing capacity for empathy. It also helps in breaking up the fixated interpretation that one may have given to one's own behavior. Sometimes it dawns on a main player that the other person didn't see it that way at all.

The Maneuvers in the Psychodrama: Each of the psychodramatic techniques opens a new angle, and each angle allows the mind to re-construct the meaning of the event in a more creative and constructive way.

Levels of Disclosure: Enactments involve not only what was said, but equally true for understanding, what else might not have been said. What was said to oneself? What might have been said, but the people involved didn't have the words, weren't yet aware of the mixed feelings involved?

So often just admitting that for every action there might have been if not an equal in intensity, yet possibly an opposite thought, a possibility. Inner conflict, ambivalence, is quite common. Often people do things having been tempted to do maybe the opposite, or something else. When we recognize this in ourselves and others, encounters become more real. We don't just react to what others say, but begin to question the fullness of commitment. As an example, when our parents disciplined us, did we dare to imagine that the cliché might have been true? Could it be that when a parent who gave a spanking to a child said, "This is harder on me than it is on you," she meant it?

Replaying the Past: In fact, memories are lively constructs and can be to some degree re-programmed by implanting intentional false memory traces! (I just made that phrase up) The

point is what the noted psychoanalyst, Franz Alexander, said, “a corrective emotional experience.” He was referring to the non-judgmental attitude of the analyst, but in psychodrama the main player dares to imagine a scene where the trauma or stress is played out differently and the character of the main player-as-child is not humiliated, but helped. It turns out that the feelings released here, the catharsis, is not the core of the healing, but rather simply reinforces the healing. It’s as if to say, with tears of relief, “Yes, that should have been what happened.”

De-Sensitizing or Daring to Envision the Future: Fears and hopes can be played out, and in so doing, the main player is prepared for those situations. This of course happens in astronaut training, in flight simulators. It happens on a massive million-person enterprise in a nation’s generals producing military exercises. It happens as politicians rehearse for debates. Physicians use high-tech mannequins to practice complex procedures. And ordinary people can be helped via psychodrama to prepare for the future, too.

Equally important is the group’s support in giving permission to dare to envision a happy ending, to consciously imagine achieving a positive goal. People tend to avoid this, an unconscious defense against being disappointed, and need some encouragement for getting on with their dreams. Moreno said that as a medical student in Vienna, he attended one of Freud’s lectures. After the lecture Moreno said he told Freud, “Well, professor, you analyze people’s dreams, but I want to give them the courage to dream new dreams.” Whether or not this anecdote was literally true—Moreno did attend the medical school and might well have had an interaction like this—, the point is that helping people to dare to envision explicitly is a remarkable and health-giving maneuver.

Re-Framing and Being Explicit About It

So, building on this angle, another way of seeing action explorations as a reflective process is that it not only uses various frames of drama—past, future, different levels of disclosure, different viewpoints—, but it makes these shifts quite *explicit*. There is no need to impress an audience—that’s offering the illusion of verisimilitude—being like real life—but in fact, real life is full of gropings and mixed feelings that many people don’t express.

Making these dramatic conventions and frames explicit can illuminate many situations at work and in the home. It can be used to clarify a variety of communications. Admittedly, sometimes we are not clear ourselves about what we mean, but that’s my point: Wouldn’t it be good if someone could say comfortably, “I am not sure what I want to say here. Let me try out a couple things and see what works.” “I don’t know how I feel yet. Let’s keep talking and I’ll see if it comes into consciousness.”

When putting on a play for an audience, the goal is the aforementioned verisimilitude, generating the illusion of authenticity with all the awkwardness edited out. But in fact, these edited, polished dramas lack the tentativeness of many real-life negotiations. So using psychodrama as a reflective practice helps to highlight and bring to the fore, to make explicit, the meta-communications or frames that help the people understand what’s being sought. Indeed, a polished product or endpoint is NOT the goal, but rather a raising of consciousness and empathy. We are to give each other slack as we recognized that we ourselves are works-in-progress.

The popular assumption is based on the persona, the mask we project to the outside world, and most often that is that we know what we want and say what we mean. But that’s only true some

of the time. Often we may not be all that effective in saying what we mean clearly, but our intention is clear to ourselves. At other times we ourselves are muddy about our own thoughts. Sometime we're ambivalent, and some time we don't even realize this—it's unconscious. We want this but we fear that what we want may not be the best for us. Or we aren't at all sure what we want. But we're supposed to know our own minds—that's a sign of maturity, isn't it? And sometimes we do, but dare we admit even to ourselves that we aren't at all sure what we think, feel, desire? Should this be an occasion of shame? Of course, the truth is that this happens frequently and we would be wiser if we took it into consideration and built it into communications and problem-solving.

The problem is compounded because the working it out might best occur as we play it out, not ahead of time in our minds. To want the latter is to impose an unrealistic expectation on ourselves and as a result, generate varying degrees again of unnecessary shame.

What I'm getting at is making the whole process more transparent, expressing meta-communications and comments in words, more making explicit our confusion, the rules for a provisional exploration, the request to have this activity taken as provisional, as play, the naming of which frame we're trying on.

In the psychodramatic process—for that is what we're talking about, really—action explorations expose the foundations. It's like Brecht, in a way: This is a play. Here are the props. Only it's even deeper. There is no solution. The audience theoretically could alter the flow of events. It is indeed a process, an exploratory, collaborative process, not a performance. I think this makes for some very fundamental shifts in how we think about it in the largest frame: What are we

doing here?

Summary

So there is a logic to theory in psychodrama: How can we be more creative in our lives? Improvise spontaneously. How can we cultivate this improvisational process? Build a capacity for warming-up. How can we sustain this warm-up? Play, use group techniques to foster mutual self-disclosure, model support, discourage competitive judgmentalness. How can we explore problems? Use the stage and various roles main player, director, supporting players, audience. Then use various psychodramatic techniques as the enactments proceed. There are many associated theories in psychodrama, too role theory, sociometric theory, a deeper philosophy of creativity, associated theories of psychotherapy, education, philosophy. This is as it should be: There should be no single theory about so complex a problem theories are only explanatory systems, and there are many integrated theories in other fields. There should be no desire for or expectation of a single theory in psychology, either!

References

Blatner, A. (2013). Website papers about psychodrama: There are many here that I recommend your reading: <http://www.blatner.com/adam/papers.html#Psychodrama>. Also articles on sociodrama, role theory, sociometry, etc.

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