Psychotherapy Guidebook

PSYCHODRAMA

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

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DEFINITION

Psychodrama is a natural and automatic process. Everyone at some time has an inner drama going on in his mind. In this confidential setting you are the star of your Psychodrama session and play all of the roles. The others you encounter in your monodrama may be your parents, an employer, a God you love or one who has forsaken you, a wife, husband, or lover who has rejected you or demands more than you are willing to give. The others, or, as they are called in Psychodrama, "your auxiliary egos," may not be actual human adversaries but some ideal someone or something you want but cannot have — an unfulfilled dream, or perhaps an obsession for fame or wealth.

Many people are able to act out these internal psychodramas in the reality and activity of their external life. For such people, Psychodrama is not a necessary vehicle except as an interesting adjunct to their life experiences. But for most people, Psychodrama can provide a unique opportunity for externalizing their internal world onto a theatrical stage of life; and, with the help of the group present at a session, emotional conflicts and problems can often be resolved.

In Psychodrama a person is encountering his conflicts and psychic pain in a setting that more closely approximates his real-life situation than in most other therapeutic approaches. A young man in conflict with a parent talks directly to a person as an auxiliary ego playing his parent. The fantasy (or reality) of his hostility or love can be acted out on the spot. He can experience his pain (in one context, his "primal emotions") not in an artificial setting but in direct relationship to the "father", "mother," or other person who helped build the pain into him, since his enactment takes place as closely as possible to the pertinent, specific core situations in his life.

The resolution of his pain or conflict does not necessarily require an extensive analysis or discussion because he is experiencing the emotions in situ, in action. Often, when someone has had a deep psychodramatic experience, there is no need for lengthy group discussion — sharing — or analysis. The protagonist has learned about the mystery of his problem in action; he feels better immediately, and it is not necessary to go beyond that point.

People develop problems, conflicts, and psychic pain in the normal course of their day-to-day life scenarios. To be sure, extensive one-to-one or discussion group therapies help to unravel a person's emotional mystery; however, at some point the person involved must enact his discoveries or insights in life. The logic of Psychodrama is that the person and the group

learns or relearns best in action that most closely approximates life — and that is in Psychodrama. In many cases, the combination of individual counseling or verbal group therapy in concert with Psychodrama maximizes therapeutic results.

Another important aspect of Psychodrama is that it is a mirror of life, not only for the central protagonist or star having a session, but for the group present at a session. Group participants are encouraged to witness aspects of their own lives that became manifest in the session, as if watching a dramatic play that projects their own behavior onto the stage in front of them.

HISTORY

The origin, development, and meaning of Psychodrama is intrinsically part of the life history of Dr. J. L. Moreno (1889-1974), founder of Psychodrama, sociometry, and the group psychotherapy movement. Moreno, in his early years, planted the roots of Psychodrama in the rich philosophical and psychological soil of Vienna around the turn of the century. During that period, Moreno's goal was to develop a "theatrical cathedral" for the release of the natural human spontaneity and creativity that he believed existed naturally in everyone. As early as 1910, Moreno was preoccupied with the development of this concept of a humanistic theater of life. In that period, Moreno's Theatre of Spontaneity was a place where people in groups had the

opportunity to act out their deepest dreams, frustrations, aspirations, moods of aggression, and love; in brief, the range of their human emotions. Moreno's early dreams have substantially materialized into the psychodramatic form that is practiced today around the world.

In the early period of Moreno's Theatre of Spontaneity, he had a limited concern with fostering "therapy" or "mental health." These positive consequences were noted by Moreno only as side effects of the psychodramatic process, which he saw as an opportunity to free the spontaneously creative self.

Moreno came to the United States in 1925 to promote an invention he was then working on, a machine for the recording and playback of sound on steel discs. He decided to remain in the United States, was licensed, began medical-psychiatric practice in New York. Immediately, he set out to introduce Psychodrama into the mental health professions and into American culture in general. He began psychodramatic work with children at the Plymouth Institute in Brooklyn and also became involved with the Mental Hygiene Clinic at Mt. Sinai Hospital. In 1929 he began the first regular program of large-scale "open" Psychodrama in America three times a week in an Impromptu Group Theatre at Carnegie Hall. He later continued his work and practice with his wife and colleague, Zerka, at the Moreno Institute, Beacon, New York. Zerka continues his work at the Moreno Institute, the

center of a worldwide Psychodrama movement.

TECHNIQUE

Psychodrama has considerable adaptability and flexibility. All that is required for a session is the conflict (philosophical or concrete), the group, and a psychodramatist. The freedom for a group to act out its problems is represented by the freedom of space on a stage, or any open space.

All Psychodrama sessions have several intrinsic elements: a director — the catalyst of the session; a subject or protagonist — the individual who presents a problem and represents the group in the session; the auxiliary ego(s) — who plays the role required by the protagonist for presenting the problem; and techniques such as role-reversal, the double, mirror, and the soliloquy.

The group present is crucial to a Psychodrama because all members are considered participants. The group is not an audience as in a theatrical production. Many members will participate actively at some point in a session as auxiliary egos, but even those who sit through a session without speaking are expected to be empathetic and identify with the protagonist and the problems being presented. The group and the director enter the protagonist's world with him, even though at a later session they may attempt to introduce the consensual reality of the group present or the larger societal viewpoint.

According to Moreno, “The person’s enactment of their reality comes first — their retraining comes later.” In this regard, Moreno advocates allowing the protagonist as much as possible to pick his scene, his place, and his auxiliary ego in order to enact his problem.

It is an assumption of Psychodrama that a protagonist learns and relearns more effectively when he is deeply involved in a crucial scene from his life than if he simply talks about a situation. It involves “insight in action.” Often, the protagonist who has experienced the insight may experience it on a subconscious level. When this happens, it is usually unnecessary for him to have to verbalize his insight or catharsis. It is his, he has already experienced it in action. As Moreno stated, “Even when an interpretation of an act is made, the action is more primary. There can be no meaningful interpretation without the act taking place first.”

There are three phases to a Psychodrama session: 1) the warmup, 2) the action, and 3) the post-discussion. The warmup and the action of a session are vital, and the post-discussion is also highly significant. This is the portion of a session during which the group members share their empathy and experiences with the protagonist. For example, in the session revolving around the engagement, many members of the group revealed their own uncertainties about accepting the boundaries of marriage. This has the honest effect of apprizing the protagonist that he is not alone in the dilemma. It also

provides the group members with the opportunity to reflect openly about their involvement in the session and to synthesize their responses. There is ample room for analysis in Psychodrama, but the basic principle is that analysis should always follow the action and the post-discussion. In the post-discussion phase, the director must draw from the group their identification with the protagonist. This process produces group insight, increases cohesion, and enlarges interpersonal perceptions.

APPLICATIONS

Many people, after their first participation in Psychodrama, raise the question, "Isn't it painful to enact a difficult experience even in the controlled environment of a Psychodrama?" Sometimes it is, but the basic premise of the question is not accurate. It is impossible to exactly relive any experience. What is usually produced in Psychodrama is the person's here-and-now mental picture of an important past scenario of his life. The concept of the here and now in Psychodrama thus encompasses past and future projections of significant life events as they currently exist in the person's internal monodrama.

An important aspect of Psychodrama is that all of these time states are explicated in action. Some of these issues are revealed in the case example of a series of Psychodrama sessions I ran with a young man incarcerated in a

state hospital for the so-called criminally insane. Ralph, at eighteen, was in custody for blacking out of control and attempting to kill his father. The verbal interactions he had with various therapists in the hospital about his "past behavior" had admittedly been of limited help in reaching him. His immediate therapist requested that I direct a Psychodrama session with Ralph to help him explore some of Ralph's psychodynamics in action. In this case, Psychodrama became a valuable adjunct to Ralph's individual therapy.

In addition to Ralph's potential for violence, another symptom that he manifested was a body tic. According to a medical report by a doctor who had examined Ralph, there appeared to be no physiological basis for the tic. In the first Psychodrama session I ran with Ralph as the protagonist, I noted that the tic was enacted and accentuated whenever there was reference to his father, or sometimes even when the word, "father" was used.

In the session, Ralph led us back to a basic and traumatic scene in his life with his father. He acted out a horrendous situation that occurred when he was eight: his father punished him by tying him up by his hands to a ceiling beam in their cellar — like meat on a hook — and then beat him with a belt.

We determined from several sessions with Ralph, and my consultations with his therapist, that the traumatic experience of the whipping and other parental atrocities produced his tic. The tic seemed to be a way he controlled

striking back at his basic antagonist, his father. In brief, Ralph had two extreme postures that emerged from his parental abuse: one was the tic that incapacitated him from the other — extreme, uncontrolled violence.

In the final scene of one Psychodrama, we had progressed to a point where Ralph accepted a male nurse as an auxiliary ego in the role of his father. In the Psychodrama scene, Ralph would alternately produce the tic or attempt to attack his "father." There was hardly any verbalization of Ralph's rage — he required an action form to express his emotions.

After Ralph had physically acted out much of his rage, I finally improvised a psychodramatic vehicle that facilitated a conversation between Ralph and his auxiliary ego "father." I put a table between him and his "father." At the same time he talked to his father, I gave him the option and freedom to punch a pillow that he accepted symbolically as his father. This combination of Psychodrama devices enabled Ralph to structure in thought and put into words his deep venom for his father. He blurted out much of his long-repressed hatred in a lengthy diatribe. Finally, we removed the props, and after his rage was spent, he fell into his "father's" arms and began to sob, "Why couldn't you love me? I was really a good kid, Dad. Why couldn't you love me?"

Although he went through several phases of his hostility in several

sessions, he could not go all the way and forgive his father, a symbolic act that I had determined would help to relieve him of the ball of hostility in his gut that produced his violent acting-out behavior.

In a later session, we had him play the role of his father, and he for the first time began to empathize with the early experiences in his father's life that brutalized him. Ralph's grandfather — who beat his son — was the original culprit and Ralph was indirectly receiving the fallout of his father's anger toward his father, or Ralph's grandfather. When Ralph reversed roles and returned to himself, it diminished his hostility towards his father and he, at least psychodramatically, that day forgave him.

A central point in explicating Ralph's extreme Psychodrama experience is to reveal that the learning-in-action on his part, combined with his private sessions, was effective. Ralph could not just talk about his anger. He required a vehicle such as Psychodrama that gave him the opportunity to physically and psychologically reenact the scenarios of the early parental crimes against him in their bizarre details. In my experience with Psychodrama, this seems to be the case for most people. Although most people's problems are not as extreme as Ralph's, at times we all require an action-oriented psychodramatic experience for catharsis from and insight into an emotional problem.

Most people require an active vehicle for expression, either exclusively

or as an adjunct to an individual-verbal approach. It is apparent to many individual therapists that many clients, when embroiled in the discussion of deep emotions, either have the urge or actually get up off the therapeutic couch or chair and begin to physically move around. It is precisely at this point of action that Psychodrama comes into play. There is no real conflict between verbal analysis and role playing; there is, however, ample psychodramatic evidence that most people could benefit from some form of learning-in-action as an adjunct to their verbal-discussion therapy.