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The Triadic System: Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy

Drama is a transliteration of the Greek ἔπαμα which means action, or a thing done. Psychodrama is a transliteration of a thing done to and with the psyche, the psyche in action. Psychodrama can be defined, therefore, as the science which explores the "truth" by dramatic methods.

—J. L. Moreno
1964 *Psychodrama*, Volume 1

J. L. Moreno believed that full healing involved the combined approach of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy. He referred to this as his triadic system, and he is considered to be the creator of all three.

If psychodrama explores the inner world of the person, sociometry explores the social world of the person. Psychodrama is intrapersonal, and sociometry is interpersonal. The two approaches marry in the context of group therapy to investigate not only the person but also the person within the system in which they operate, as represented by what we call, in psychodrama and sociometry, a person's "social atom" (see page 106).

Moreno writes in reflection on his early attempts at group psychotherapy, "The merely analytic and verbal method of group psychotherapy very soon led to difficulties. As long as group psychotherapy was practiced only *in situ*, that is, within

the family, the factory, etc., where life is lived, in all dimensions of the present, in action, in thought and speech, as monologue, dialogue, or drama, the psychomotor element of the organism and the creative meaning of the encounter remained unconscious and uninvestigated. When, however, the moment came to move from a natural to a synthetic place—for instance, from the family to the clinic—it was necessary to restructure life in all its dimensions in order to carry out therapy in the actual meaning of the word. All relationships which occur in everyday life had, therefore, to be constructed anew; we had to have a space in which the life of the family could be lived in the same fashion as it occurred in reality as well as symbolically. The bedroom, the kitchen, the garden, the *dramatis personae* of the family—father, mother, child—the discussions, conflicts, and tensions between them just as they occur in everyday life, all that which is taken for granted and remains unconscious had to be reconstructed but reduced to the truly symbolic elements. What before appeared as problematic and unfortunate became an asset. Group psychotherapy was forced to enter into all dimensions of existence in a depth and breadth which were unknown to the verbally oriented psychotherapist. Group psychotherapy turned into action psychotherapy and psychodrama.”

THE FIVE MAIN ELEMENTS OF A PSYCHODRAMA

The five main elements of a psychodrama are the *stage*, the *protagonist*, the *director* (the therapist), the *auxiliary ego* or egos, and the *audience* (the group). Here we take a closer look at each of these elements.

The Stage

Psychodrama incorporates space into the therapeutic process. The stage is offered as a concrete situation within which a protagonist’s story can be brought to life. Life happens *in situ* (in place or situation), and psychodrama allows resolution to occur through simulated role-play that mirrors real life. The hunger to act is as old as humanity, to demonstrate who we are in some dramatic form. While writers get to “live twice,” once through living and once through writing about life, so protagonists also live twice—once through living and once through distilling and demonstrating the context of a situation in the form of a

model scene deconstructing the depth and meaning as it relates uniquely to them. Alvin Toffler, in his landmark book, *Future Shock*, recommended that every home of the future should have a psychodramatic stage on which to heal the daily wounds that are a natural part of the “slings and arrows” that our “flesh is heir to.”

Moreno said, “The stage is enough.” The stage is any space that has been designated as a working space. To give someone the stage is to give her the opportunity to meet herself, to take a journey inward with the support of the director, auxiliary egos and audience. It is to provide a place or a platform where her story can be told, shown and witnessed by others.

The Protagonist

The protagonist is the person whose story is being enacted or told, the person who, *de facto*, represents the central concern, or emerging themes in the group. Protagonists work with the director in identifying and warming up to their own scene or story and concretizing it on the stage. Their willingness to fully engage with the auxiliaries in their own drama, and to move with the action and the director, will influence where and how deep the work will go for all participants. Protagonists are responsible for staying true to their own stories and engaging in the action as honestly as possible.

The role of the protagonist is to delve into his or her internal world with the intention of resolving inner conflicts. She has the responsibility to engage in her own healing process and the opportunity to share her story with support, to have it witnessed and become aware of the emotions and thought processes and behaviors that are attached to it. It is the protagonist who assigns group members to play each role in her drama. This choosing process is part of her warm-up to the material being explored. It may take time. She may even, after making a choice, wish to change it for someone who feels closer to the role, and this can occur at any point throughout the process.

Another part of the protagonist’s warm-up is scene setting, either through the use of props or by describing the scene to therapist and group.

Due, at least in part, to psychodrama’s full sensory involvement, protagonists often feel “a weight being lifted”; emotions that have been held in the

musculature release; the body as well as the eyes get a chance to cry. It is not unheard of for protagonists to have an outburst of anger, a high-pitched vocal moment of rage followed by a river of tears as the body releases long-held emotion. It is not expulsion for expulsion's sake, which would be no more healing than acting-out behavior; it is a release in the service of linking and understanding. Often they report a tremendous release and sense of overall calm as they come into a very receptive state for taking in support and caring from others through reformed auxiliary work, group sharing or both. All of this slowly lays the groundwork for new neural patterning.

The Director

The director of a psychodrama is the professional therapist who leads the warm-up, action and sharing. He also facilitates the choice-making process of the protagonist, the decisions involving what material will be examined psychodramatically and how that enactment will take shape in time and space.

The role of director is to aid the protagonist in actualizing his or her own story so that it can be reconstructed, shared and examined in concrete form. The protagonist is allowed to lead the way in choosing what material to explore, with the director empowering the protagonist to take ownership of his or her own healing process. The job of the director is to follow the lead of the protagonist in the production of the protagonist's surplus reality, always allowing the protagonist to define that reality as he sees it and being willing to go where the protagonist feels internally led. The particular associative process that represents the unique internal journey of the protagonist, along with the sense and meaning he has made of the events of his life, is what will most likely yield the most useful insights and "ahas" for the protagonist.

One of the safeguards against retraumatizing clients is to leave the reins in their hands; they have the choice of when to stop and when to go. The goal isn't to unearth each and every detail or to reexperience all feelings, particularly when a protagonist feels forced to constantly go over what a well-meaning therapist feels will be useful for him to recollect. It seems to be more useful to follow the associative path of the protagonist as it unwinds through the labyrinths of his mind and heart, to tease out the way in which the events of his

life affected *him*. What meaning did he make out of relationships and circumstances that he is still living by today, and what core beliefs about the self does he carry that affect how he sees and operates within his world?

The Auxiliary Ego

The role of the auxiliary ego is to represent the people in the protagonist's life or other aspects of the protagonist's inner world as accurately as possible, using information shared by the protagonist as well as her own experience of what thinking, feeling and behavior appear to be a part of the role. This allows the protagonist to view her own reality as it is stored within her, whether it be distorted, illusionary or grounded in reality, and to identify the manner in which she experienced her own relationships and the meaning she made out of the nature of those connections. "The auxiliary ego brings the protagonist into the situation, interprets for the absentee figure . . . auxiliaries work on two levels: the role they take and the experience they bring to it. There are regional or cultural differences regarding appropriate behavior of a "father, mother, child, etc." (Z. Moreno 1986–87)

In psychodrama we explore the protagonist's subjective reality and offer the opportunity to deal with the real rather than the imagined. Reality is brought to life through the use of auxiliary egos or improvisational actors chosen by the protagonist to represent particular people in her life. These auxiliaries have, according to Zerka Moreno, five functions: (1) to represent the role required by the protagonist, (2) to approximate the protagonist's perception of the person being portrayed, (3) to find out what is really going on within the interaction, (4) to reverse roles and understand the inner world of the protagonist, and (5) to provide contact with real people rather than imagined people, thereby enabling the protagonist to begin making a connection that is real.

Auxiliary ego work is also a part of spontaneity training. In a split second, auxiliaries are asked to come up with an adequate response to the situation emerging around the protagonist, to put their own needs aside so they can work in service of the needs of the protagonist while simultaneously drawing on their own histories, learning and creativity in order to best approximate the role as it was originally experienced by the protagonist.

Roles that lie dormant within the self system of the auxiliary may reemerge in the psychodramatic moment to be played out through the auxiliary role which, as long as it is tailored to the needs of the protagonist that is, as long as they are playing out the protagonist's version and not their own, can be healing for all involved. The auxiliary who had a critical father, for example, stands for a moment in the shoes of the protagonist's critical father, both playing out the role at a safe distance from their own past experience and viewing the role from within the position of the self, gaining insight as to the motivations, needs and drives that are a part of that role. "Feel free to remove the auxiliary if s/he gets in the way of the action. The auxiliary is a helper, so keep them helpful" (Z. Moreno 1986–87).

Reformed Auxiliary Ego

Once the protagonist psychodramatically works through her issues sufficiently for this session, offering a corrective experience in the form of a reformed auxiliary ego can sometimes be useful. Until this point the protagonist may have used the auxiliary ego to live out the aspects of the situation that have led to problems in their own life. Next, the auxiliary ego can be given back to the protagonist in a reformed sense; that is, as she "wishes it had been." Here, too, the protagonist lets us know how she would like to experience the auxiliary. She may also reverse roles and become the auxiliary, giving herself the experience she longed for.

Paradoxically, finally receiving what has long been wished for can be very anxiety-provoking or even painful. The reformed auxiliary ego is a useful model for the protagonist to take into life so that she can begin to know what it feels like to have what she wants and learn to accept it in small doses within a safe structure. It may also be useful for the protagonist to interact with the reformed auxiliary as a form of role training. Psychodrama allows for the direct involvement of what Moreno refers to as the "therapeutic actor." He explains, "On portraying the role it is expected that the ego will identify himself privately with the role to the best of his ability, not only to act and pretend but to 'be' it. The hypothesis here is that what certain patients need, more than anything else, is to enter into contact with people who apparently have a profound and warm feeling for him.

For instance, if it happens that he, as a child, never had a real father, in a therapeutic situation the one who takes the part of the father should create in the patient the impression that here is a man who acts as he would like to have had his father act; that here is a woman, especially if he never had a mother when he was young, who acts and is like what he wishes his mother to have been, etc. The warmer, more intimate and genuine the contact is, the greater are the advantages, which the patient can derive from the psychodramatic episode. The all-out involvement of the auxiliary ego is indicated for the patient who has been frustrated by the absence of such maternal, paternal, or other constructive and socializing figures in his lifetime.

The Audience (The Group)

The group is the therapeutic context and the safe container through which healing occurs in all roles: protagonist, auxiliary ego and audience (witness) or group member. Out of the group emerge protagonists who represent their own and other group members' inner dramas. Deep healing work can take place within the audience role. Through the process of identification, those watching an enactment may experience feelings as powerful as those of the protagonist. Good group members learn to use those portions of the enactment with which they identify to concretize their own internal dramas so related feelings can become conscious and available to them. Sometimes the heat of the psychodramatic stage is too much for a client, while the audience role offers access to the material being explored from a "safe distance." The opportunity for profound healing exists through this identification. Group members may feel themselves alternately pulled, repelled, moved or shut down as the scenes unravel before them in the psychodramatic moment. They can cultivate the ability to deconstruct the scene *as it relates to them*. Because a scene is occurring in a safe clinical situation, the audience members can afford the luxury, so to speak, of observing their own reactions to it. For instance, why do they identify so strongly here, shut down there, feel their stomachs tighten and their hearts race, wish to cry at still another point, or feel liberated at some other juncture?

It is important that audience members have plenty of time to share what

emerged for them during the enactment in order to deconstruct the scene as it relates to their own lives through sharing with the protagonist in the presence of one another. Sharing, in the psychodramatic form, is *not* feedback. It is sharing what emerged in the witness role from one's own self and life. It is heart-to-heart and mind-to-mind identification. This sharing from such a deep place gives the group members the opportunity to understand themselves with greater awareness and depth and allows them to connect with another person (the protagonist) at that level—to share a moment of truth, so to speak, and create an authentic connection. When the audience members share what came up for them with the protagonist, it also reduces the isolation of the protagonist, reconnects the protagonist to the group through support and identification, and allows new connections to be made.

The notion that dramatic representation of tragedy produces a catharsis of pity and fear goes back to the fourth century B.C., to Aristotle's *Poetics*. The plays focused on a few deep concerns and complexes central to all people. Through identification with the action people could experience a spectator catharsis, effecting a purge of their own painful feelings and deepening their understanding of a life dynamic or situation.

