PSYCHODRAMA TRAINING TIPS

by

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TRAINING THERAPEUTIC ASSISTANTS FOR PSYCHODRAMA

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INTRODUCTION

The psychodramatic method, as described by J. L. Moreno (8), uses five main instruments--the stage, the subject or patient, the director, the staff of therapeutic aides or auxiliary egos, and the audience. Many directors choose to train their own corps of auxiliary egos, or as I call them, after Corsisi's (3) more general term, therapeutic assistants. Whatever called, these specialized helpers have the dual responsibility of serving as extensions of the director's ego as well as the subject's ego. As supporting actors, they serve the protagonist-subject, or chief actor, by portraying the roles required by him in presenting his own personal drama. They help him to understand the nature of his important relationships. They can interpret for the protagonist those feelings in others that he might otherwise be blind to. In their doubling function, they can help the protagonist and group. They are his "co-therapist" although it is understood that only those trained in recognized institutes of learning can be called "group therapist" or "psychodramatists." They help him during the warm-up of the group by picking up feelings that he might miss, by suggesting issues that are of current concern, and by being a role model of the spontaneous, involved and flexible group member. Assuming that they themselves are reasonably mentally healthy, they add to the sum of ego strength and spontaneity available to the director. Trained to "put themselves in brackets" while enacting a role, they help to minimize the types of role distortions that can sabotage a session when untrained auxiliaries are used. Equally trained to be in touch with their own feelings and affective memories, they are invaluable resource participants during the post action or sharing phase of the session. Those who have worked with a particular director over a period of time get to know his ways, his wishes and his philosophy of therapy. They become familiar with his gestural language and can modify their role playing with a minimal cue from him. Since the director, in turn, gets to know what he can expect from particular auxiliaries he is able to use their unique talents to advantage in creating a smooth, therapeutically effective and esthetically satisfying production.

It is best for the director to avoid doing anything in the therapy group that someone else can do. This frees him to concentrate on his special function as producer, therapist and teacher. If there is a need for him to be auxiliary ego, double or protagonist, it is best that he relinquish his directing to someone else, such as one of his more advanced student auxiliaries.

It is possible, and at times preferable, to use untrained auxiliaries from the group to play the role of the important others in the drama of the protagonist. But, more often than not, the quality of the production and effectiveness of the therapy is enhanced when trained auxiliaries are available. This, of course, requires more staffing and in-service training.

A training group for such functionaries has met weekly since 1965 at Brook Lane Psychiatric Center (19). Four slots on the staff were created specifically for therapeutic assistants. In addition to these four, the group includes persons working at Maryland Psychodrama Workshops, nurses from such specific hospital programs as adolescent and day care, and persons who have come for training in psychodrama. The group has included such diversities of backgrounds as housewives, retired businessmen, ex-patients, college students and instructors, ministers, psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses and other mental health workers. Until a specific mental health discipline called psychodrama emerges, this director will continue to select as auxiliaries persons whose main qualifications are an understanding of human dynamics, sensitivity to the needs of others and dedication to the psychodramatic method. Every training group member is actively engaged in on-going therapy groups at the hospital or at MARYLAND PSYCHODRAMA WORKSHOPS.

The purpose of the group is to help the auxiliaries to increase their efficiency in role playing and to improve the functioning relationship between director and auxiliary. I have found the trained auxiliary an indispensable part of my directing style. It is well worth the staff training time necessary to develop the kinds of skills I want an auxiliary to have.

To develop their skills, the students not only learn the methods of psychodrama, but are expected to work through some of their

personal problems by becoming protagonist in their own psychodramas. It is not unusual for trainees to work on relationships within the training group itself. At times, feelings about specific patients or clients are worked through. If an auxiliary is having difficulty in playing a particular type of role, this would suggest a need to do a psychodrama. Once a month the training group meets at a public session. This gives the public an opportunity to learn about and participate in psychodrama. It gives the therapeutic assistants a chance to demonstrate their skills before a different kind of group with a different set of problems in what, because of the public nature of the session, becomes a different kind of psychodrama.

Twice a year the group attends a three-day training workshop at the Moreno Institute in Beacon, New York. Here they can be exposed to differing styles of directing, can have their skills evaluated and can be directed by others who are less intimately involved with the Brook Lane training group. The Beacon experience also affords them the perspective of physical distance from where they ordinarily live and work, as well as providing the occasion for contact with other psychodramatists at various levels of training.

As other psychodrama institutes open up, the training group members expand their contact boundaries with the psychodrama network by attendance there. Serving several diffferent kinds of directorial styles widens their experience of what can be done through the use of psychodrama. Field trips to other institutions using psychodrama keep the students from being too insulated. They are also encouraged to attend the National Convention of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama held annually in early spring, generally in New York City.

GUIDELINES FOR TRAINEES

Barbara Seabourne (15) has described the crucial elements of good auxiliary work acknowledging that every psychodrama team will discover its own. She mentions such things as keeping the action going, making use of all cues from both director and protagonist, and keeping in role. She suggests ways of making gradual role transformations or sudden shifts, as required by the director.

Pointers on the art of doubling are also given. Her suggestions for warming-up auxiliaries (16) are very pertinent, but need to be worked on explicitly during staff training sessions.

Zerka Moreno's survey of psychodramatic techniques (12) and her monograph on rules, techniques and adjunctive methods (11) are most helpful resources for the director who trains his own auxiliaries. Howard Blatner (2) justifiably refers to the latter as "one of the most important sources of information. Basic, excellent!!" All three of the Moreno volumes on psychodrama are, of course, classic and basic texts, and Volume III, which is concerned with action therapy and principles of practice, is most practically related to training (10).

It is important for members of the training group to be aware that the standards of ethical conduct expected of all group therapists also apply to auxiliary personnel. They should know specifically what these standards are, and there is no better guide than Moreno's (9).

The didactic auxiliary chair technique can be used to review for the students such basic concepts as protagonists, auxiliary ego, tele, doubling role reversal, soliloquy and surplus reality (20). With this technique, the director, and perhaps his assistants, in a series of encounters, can specifically and progressively demonstrate any number of different psychodrama methods. It is possible, using this approach, for the director-teacher to step aside and let one of the students direct an ecounter, highlighting a certain technique. This gives the student experience in a directing task before an audience without his having to take responsibility for a whole session.

THE TYPICAL TRAINING GROUP SESSION

At the beginning of a training group session, we critically review the various patient and client psychodrama sessions of the past week. Sometimes students have already been assigned the task of session analyst or have been asked to focus attention on specific group members. Students are sometimes asked to "silently or implicitly" double a given group member for several weeks. Or a student may have been asked to follow how a particular technique

or concept was used in the groups he attended. Reading assignments can be related to what is actually happening in the groups. Group process may be studied or individual dynamics explored. Misunderstandings are ironed out and alternate solutions to the same directing or role playing problem can be discussed. After such "Monday morning quarter backing," then, if a student wants to work on a personal problem psychodramatically, this is given priority. A fellow student is chosen director and the rest serve as audience or auxiliaries. This part of the session is itself processed for further learning.

The training group is also a place where we experiment with new action methods before incorporating them into the regular psychodrama groups. It's policy never to ask a patient to do something we haven't done and understood ourselves. We invent or borrow or rework new methods to suit our own style of psychodrama. Those action techniques that are not appropriate for psychodrama can be employed to increase the student's sensitivity and role playing repertoire. Some of the methods we have found useful include sensory awareness (5) (14), perceptual-motor training (13), improvisational theatre (6) (17), method acting (18), and encounter games (7). Some of the methods of Gestalt therapy (4) foster self understanding on the part of students while those of psychosynthesis (1) are helpful in mobilizing their imagination.

USE OF ACTION TECHNIQUES IN THE TRAINING GROUP

In this article the application of action technique to the training of therapeutic assistants can only be suggested. To those we have employed, other directors could add many more. Using these methods willy-nilly, just to be doing something, of course, is to be avoided.Students will soon see through this. It is imperative to suit the exercises to the growth needs of the students. The particular exercises used during a training session often are suggested by problems arising in the ongoing psychodrama groups. They meet the student "where he is at" and help advance him through an experience in a way lecturing could never accomplish. Psychodrama directors, auxiliaries, and doubles, like the method actor, experience "moments of difficulty" (18) during a session. These "moments of difficulty" can be noted and later worked on during the training session. One way to handle the difficulty is to go back

to the original problem and have the student role play what was happening. Once he begins to recapitulate in action what had been going on in the original session, he often comes up with immediate solutions of his own. If he doesn't, it is up to the teacher to make use of some sort of action technique to facilitate the necessary new learning. This could be a simple matter of having other students role play the problem situation, giving alternate solutions.

One of the students, for example, while doubling a protagonist during a public session, was obviously blocking, missing important clues, and had to be replaced. During the next training session she recalled her "moment of difficulty" and asked for some help. In order to learn what was going on, we had her set up the scene as it happened on the night of the session. She was able to role play the protagonist, auxiliary, and herself as the double. The student had experienced difficulty when the protagonist was confronting a boyfriend who was extremely critical, cynical and sarcastic. During the delayed action recall of her blocking the student was asked to do a soliloquy and exclaimed, "of course, that's it, I had a boyfriend just like him." After this new insight, the student was given the opportunity to do her own personal psychodrama focused around her relationships with critical and sarcastic people.

To be an effective auxiliary, the student must learn to become a method actor who uses affective memory and physical action in creating a role. During training sessions, he is given a variety of exercises aimed at getting him back to personal scenes where certain emotions were evolved. He learns to build up a repertoire of personal memories which, when recalled during a role playing scene, can fuse with the character and event he is portraying to produce the required emotional response. Students, for example, learn to go into a posture and attitude devoid as possible of preoccupation. The teacher says "Think of a time, or invent a time when you felt such and such an emotion." Invariably, most of the students have a vivid memory of some event and go on to experience the appropriate emotional response.

Students also must learn the art of concentration. This helps them to pick up clues, and to sustain a role. It makes perceiving, rather than self preoccupation, possible. Spolin's (17) improvisational exercises are used a lot in the training group. A focal concept

of her system is the "point of concentration." Every exercise has its "point of concentration," or agreed upon focus that helps to solve an acting problem. Through these exercises the student learns to "keep his eye on the ball" rather than himself. This enables him to drop his fear of approval/disapproval and beome absorbed in what he is doing.

An example of a Spolin exercise relevant to a psychodramatic role playing problem is the simple exercise "How old am I?" This required a single player. The teacher-director gives such side coaching as "The bus is half a block down! It's coming closer! It's here!" Spolin gives the teacher some points to evaluate and to observe.

A keen psychodramatist, be he director or auxiliary, will keep in mind the total stage picture which includes the physical relationships between the principles as well as their body posture. A good exercise to galvanize the students' perception of this involves freezing the action. In this exercise two or more players set up an improvisational scene with the usual "who are you, where are you, and what's going on." The action begins, and when there is an interesting stage picture the teacher-director yells "Freeze." The resulting statuesque montage will suggest another who-what-where. When this is called out, the actors on stage immediately get involved in an entirely new improvisation. As the exercise continues, substitutes from the audience can come in to replace the original actors.

Several training group exercises develop the ability of the auxiliaries to make smooth transformations. Auxiliary work often demands that the actor make quick transitions from one emotion to another or one characterization to another as, for example, when one goes from the carping to the psychodramatic mother, or from a scene requiring an expression of grief to one requiring the expression of joy. In one such exercise which I call The Emotional Grid, we set up an improvisational scene in which the stage space is divided into areas of emotion. The stage partners establish a relationship between themselves, an activity, and a place where this is happening. The problem is to go from one area of the stage to another sometime during the scene, each time justifying the movements and changing the emotion according to the area

being occupied at the moment. This is a real challenge in the art of transformation. If the auxiliary is in the angry grid, for example, he would be angry; if he were lower left he would have a feeling of love and affection. In another area of the stage he would have to transform into the emotion of jealousy or pacivity or whatever.

In another exercise, a student auxiliary goes into the center with an imaginary object which he uses. He might, for example, be mixing something in a bowl. The bowl, of course, is not present but the audience can tell from the movements of the hands what is happening. As soon as someone in the group understands the movements he lets the student on stage continue his movements for a bit then goes in and picks up exactly the same movements from the other person. He then continues the motion expanding on the motion or movement until he begins to evolve a new movement; something that is different. He is not to preplan the transformation, but again just let it happen. The movements of mixing in a bowl, for example, might transform themselves into almost anything as the circular motion enlarges. A lot depends upon how the motion is picked up and what warm-up the new actor has. It might eventually be transformed into flying a kite, shooting a bow and arrow, or whirling the body around in space. This exercise continues with a third person in the group coming up to make a transformation after he has perceived the basic motion of the second person. He comes in and takes the motion away from the second person and begins to expand on it and enlarge it until he has made his transformation. The motion again becomes something else. When everyone in the group has had an opportunity to make a transformation, the exercise is over.

Many of the exercises that are done in the training group address themselves to the important point of accepting what is there and using it. For example, an actor goes into the center and establishes an environment and an encounter with an object. The second actor then comes in and relates to the first but changes the environment and encounter by what he says and does. The important point is that the first actor must accept the change and begin responses to the second according to the change in the environment. Still a third person comes in and changes it again. When the "nth" person comes in, for example, everybody who is

in one series of movements responds to the change in the environment and objects, accepting the change uncritically. Through this, and other exercises, the student auxiliaries learn to use whatever is given in a role playing scene, to make use of everything, and to never throw anything away. This, of course, is the heart of improvisation and spontaneity which, in common sense terms refers to making do or using what is there. Student auxiliaries soon add another ingredient, the hallmark of creativity, which is dealing with what is there as if it were something fresh and new, something to be explored. What is learned during training sessions has a marvelous application to anyone doing therapy, but particularly to anyone using psychodramatic methods. All of the neurotic styles tend to screen out the world in very selective ways, admitting limited data in the first place, and then organizing the data in a very rigid code. The less neurotic individual is much more open and spontaneous. He permits himself to let the environment affect him and will be responsive to, and affected by, the environment in a playful and experimental manner. To bring this point home, the teacher-director can invite the students to criticize him in any way at all. Then, instead of becoming defensive, he can let the criticisms really come into himself, begin to explore them, expand them, and deal with them. If the teacher-director is really open, he won't allow the discussion to be cut off, but will rather let it expand around the area of criticism. Such lessons in openness are important for the student auxiliaries, who in their psychodrama sessions will be exposed to all manner of material about which, in their everyday lives, they might well become defensive, or at least, as they say, "up tight." At best they have a chance to work through most of their emotional problems psychodramatically. Meantime, they have to learn ways of going beyond themselves and their personal hang-ups so that they can play the roles required with a minimum of personal damage and a maximum of helpfulness to the protagonist and the group concerns that they are representing.

As the training group becomes larger, it is often helpful to use team role playing. The format is to organize the group into small teams. Then a team composed of the more advanced students role plays a problem situation. At a point of difficulty, the teacher-director freezes the action and each member of the subteams, who has already been identifying with one of the roles on

stage, picks up the action at this point and completes it. This can be followed by a total group discussion of the alternative solutions. If a directional problem, for example, is under study, a role is assigned to that of protagonist, auxiliary, and director. The improvisation procedes on stage until the director hits a choice point or some snag to advancing the action. The teacher-director then freezes the action on stage, and has the subteams continue and advance the action each in its own way. If a problem in doubling is under consideration, the roles assigned are the protagonist, auxiliary and double. The improvising team defines the who-what-where and gets into action. At a point where the double is in trouble, the teacher-director freezes the action and again the subgroups take over.

Other training group exercises aim towards training in spontaneity, confidence, and stage worthiness. Sensory awareness exercises and encounter games, when used with discernment, have a freeing affect on the students. Gunther's revitalizing and tranqualizing exercises help them contact non-verbal levels of awareness and foster the kind of relaxed attitude, self confidence and poise so helpful in creating a productive learning atmosphere. His group games induce a readiness for physical contact should this be a role requirement. Encounter games, in general, sensitize them to others so that they are less likely to miss information being given by the protagonist and the director as they warm-up to creating a role.

Perceptual motor training and method acting are both effective vehicles for tapping affective memory. This opens up a great reservoir of material that the auxiliary can use in building a characterization. Like the method actor, the therapeutic assistant learns that the basic instrument of his trade is himself. Having no script and no rehearsal, he must be even more self reliant. And his responsibility is so much greater. More than edification and entertainment of audience is at stake. It is no less than the psychological integrity of the protagonist, not to mention the reasonable demand of each group member that the experience be at least relevant to his suffering.

At every processing or training session, we discover something new about psychodrama. We, as psychodramatists, are constantly discovering new action techniques that can help us produce richer,

more exciting and more therapeutically rewarding psychodramas. We are forever adding to our repertoire of skills and maneuvers. We keep filling up our "bags of tricks" and taking stock of our available supply. And we are continually rewarded when, as directors or therapeutic assistants, we have at our instant command the just-right behavior for a particular moment in a psychodrama. To record some of these new learnings, we have developed psychodrama tip sheets that we pass out periodically to the training group members. These training tips are offered to the students as reminders of the important psychodrama concepts and strategies emerging during our work.

It is the director's responsibility to offer his therapeutic assistants the quality of training necessary to insure a high degree of confidence in him, the method, and themselves. The more advanced therapeutic assistants do very well in being on the job as soon as they enter a psychodrama session. The teacher-director knows this by the way they quickly warm-up to the tone of the group and to individual members. He knows it by the way they pick up minor clues and later incorporate them into the action. He can tell by the way they keep in role, justifying each action and expanding on the characterization as the scene progresses. They use dialogue and asides that help the director to advance the action therapeutically. They have stage presence and know what to do with themselves until their role comes up. Communication between them and the director is smooth and accurate. Their body language fits the role and says more than a thousand words. They develop an integrity which reflects an expanded capacity for experiencing and the ability to say or do "exactly the right thing without thinking." They penetrate into the psychodrama and become totally and organically involved with it. They make the time and energy used in running a training group well worth the effort.

SUMMARY

The role of the therapeutic assistants, or auxiliary egos, is defined, and the training group for such functionaries held at Brook Lane Psychiatric Center since 1965 is described. Guidelines for trainees and helpful references for the teacher-director are given. The typical training group session includes review of patient or client

sessions, helping the auxiliaries work through any "moments of difficulty" they may have had in their work as auxiliaries during the week and trying out new action techniques. Methods found useful are sensory awareness, perceptual motor training, improvisational theatre, method acting, encounter games, and psychosynthesis. Specific examples of the uses of action techniques to train auxiliaries are given. The mutual responsibility of teacher-director and his auxiliary staff for the production of high quality psychodramas is discussed. Training tips are offered as a way of sharing what we have learned during our work in psychodrama.

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