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On Thinking Psychodramatically

As a social worker trained and nurtured in the verbal-analytic method of "case-work", my relatively brief acquaintance with psychodrama has something of the flavour of an extra-marital affair: it is exciting and seductive, but I'm not sure where it will lead me. It offers a way of working which is inherently dramatic and which can attain a dazzling elegance and power which threatens to leave traditional casework or counselling looking bland and pedestrian. It demands a level of involvement, energy and self-expression which makes it virtually impossible to take cover behind one's professional role. It promises a form of catharsis and creative self-discovery for people in distress which seems hard to match by other methods.

At the same time there are aspects of psychodrama I am not sure about. It's central concept of catharsis or working through feelings can lead to a simplistic view of emotions as bits of material which every now and then get bunged up and need to be released (rather like Freud's hydraulic model of the libido). As every social worker knows, there are people who are past masters at dredging up any feelings they care to and pouring them all over the worker, and yet are far away from any wish - or perhaps even ability - to change. I am also unsure about its potential for long-term change (but then this is a valid question for any form of therapy).

Because psychodrama is primarily a method of group therapy it is possible to mix it with individual or family therapy going on concurrently (as was the case with a psychodrama group I co-led on an in-patient psychiatric ward). This then raises the question of how compatible psychodrama is with other methods of working, and the more particular question for me of how to integrate it with my usual ways of working with clients.

It is true that to move from individual to group work is in itself a radical jump. It involves moving from thinking about one person, and his relationship to you, to seeing the group as an entity in itself consisting of a series of relationships, structures, rules, etc. But to think psychodramatically is not only to incorporate **both** of these levels of thinking and their inter-relation (e.g. how far does a protagonist's psychodrama reflect or express group issues?), it is to think in a radically different way from traditional therapies.

In a sense this is stating the obvious as psychodrama is a coming together of therapy and theatre. The therapist is a director. He must have a sense of

dramatic "rightness" as well as what is appropriate therapeutically. For someone like myself, who has no experience of drama or acting, this is a great challenge. It calls for an ability to be in touch with the protagonist and to enable him to embody or realize his conflicts or dilemmas in ways which are dramatic and insightful. Although the being in touch with the protagonist is common to other ways of working, the creation of a dramatic setting for the embodiment and enactment of his conflicts is peculiar to psychodrama, as is the cathartic and symbolic resolution or laying to rest of the problem.

There is a certain feeling of power that one wields as director or leader of a psychodrama group. This feeling may well be an expression of the typical fears and wishes about omnipotence that beginners often experience in any therapy. Nevertheless the feedback my co-leader and I received about our group on the in-patient ward gave a clear indication that many of the other activities on the ward were affected by what happened in our group. Also any psychodrama group often elicits and explores deeply-rooted and disturbing feelings in a more immediate and dramatic way than in more traditional therapies. Thus the immediate potential for change seems greater. A corollary of this is that the potential for damage or abuse also seems greater, and although I believe that most people have defences and coping mechanisms that can keep even the clumsiest therapist at bay if necessary, the protagonist in a psychodrama does seem to be in a peculiarly vulnerable state.

Having worked for some years with disturbed and chaotic individuals and families, some of whom have an inspired gift to frustrate any apparent attempts to help them, psychodrama sometimes has the appeal for me of a highly potent remedy, a shock to the system of a recalcitrant client or patient who refuses to get better. This is clearly a fantasy for me - much more realistically it raises questions about the effectiveness of traditional therapies and the chances of some sort of intercourse between them and psychodrama. Ahead lies either mutual enrichment, mutual isolation or total confusion..

Most protagonists tend to be diffident at first about role reversal with God and they are therefore permitted to remain nominally in their own role but to act as a sort of advisor to Him . . .

James M. Sacks Psychodrama p.320 Souvenir Press 1976