Psychedrama: Tools for Working in Action

Content adapted from Hudson Valley Psychodrama Institute and The Living Stage: A Step-by-Step Guide to Psychodrama, Sociometry and Experiential Group Therapy by Tian Dayton, Ph.D., TEP

Helpful Terms and Techniques:

**Psychodrama**: Conceived and developed by Jacob L. Moreno, MD, psychodrama employs guided dramatic action to examine problems or issues raised by an individual (psychodrama) or a group (sociodrama). Using experiential methods, enactment and reenactment, sociometry, role theory, and group dynamics, psychodrama facilitates insight, growth and change, and integration on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. It clarifies issues, increases physical and emotional well-being, enhances learning and develops new skills.

**Origins of Psychodrama**: Jacob L. Moreno was a psychiatrist who was born in Romania, moved to Vienna, and then to the United States. He was interested in creativity and spontaneity and wanted to wanted to make theater more alive, spontaneous, meaningful, and relevant. He noticed that it also seemed to be helpful to the actors and began to develop psychodrama.

Born about 30 years after Freud, Moreno’s approach differed from psychoanalysis in its creative, embodied, positive approach. He believed that group members can be agents for each other’s healing, and that if you help people access their own creativity and spontaneity, they can find their own solutions. He believed it was the therapist/director's job to create a safe container and warm people up to their own spontaneity. He did not believe in the concept of “resistance;” he said resistance was simply an inadequate warm-up. He defined mental health as having access to as many roles as possible, and being able to use those roles in an adaptive and spontaneous way.

He always saw therapy as being nestled in the larger context of society and social issues, as well as spirituality. "A true therapeutic process cannot have any less an objective than the whole of mankind."
He wanted to save the world by teaching people to see through each other’s eyes, learn empathy, and “return us to our lost unity with the universe.”

**Role:** A role can be a specific person (mother, brother, etc.), an abstract role like “mother,” “boss,” or it can be a job or a feeling (fear).

**Stage:** The space that is transformed into the concrete situation within which a protagonist’s story can be brought to life and allows resolution to occur through simulated role-play that mirrors real life.

**Protagonist:** The person whose story is being enacted or told; the person who represents the central concern or emerging themes within a group.

**Director:** The professional therapist who leads the warm-up, action, and sharing.

**Auxiliary Ego:** Roles that represent the people or concepts in the protagonist’s life 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.

**Audience:** The group that functions as the therapeutic context and safe container through which healing occurs in all roles. Through the process of identification, those watching an enactment may experience feelings as powerful as those of the protagonist.

**Doubling:** When one person stands behind another and expresses that person’s unexpressed feelings or thoughts through words and action. The person who is being doubled has the last word on which thoughts or feelings best reflect their inner reality. Doubling can be done by the therapist, the protagonist, or the group.

**Role Reversal:** Strategy that allows us to temporarily leave the self and experience the position of “the other”; Psychodramatically trading
places, for a moment, with another person, stepping out of one's own skin and into another’s, and seeing things through her eyes. Role reversal allows the protagonist to deconstruct that bond, to experience it from both sides and get underneath the situational elements that may have emotionally and psychologically glued the bond in place, illuminating core beliefs about the self that are being lived out in the present. Times to role reverse in a scene include: a) when you need information; and B) when the protagonist asks a question, role reverse so that the protagonist answers their own question.

**Concretization:** Take an idea or a feeling and bring it to life by asking someone to play the role of that idea or feeling using objects to represent it (e.g.: “Here is my anxiety. It is as big as this room, it's black, and it makes a growling noise”).

**Spectrograms:** Sociometric exercise intended to reveal significant information about the group very quickly, provide opportunities for encounters and connections within the group, warm-up the group for further action, and increase group cohesion. Think of the spectrogram as a graph on the floor and upon asking the criterion question (i.e.: “This end of the line means you love getting up early in the morning; the other end means you hate it.”), group members are invited to stand in a location that best represents their self-assessment and then share their thoughts and feelings behind their choices: “I am standing here because...”

**Locograms:** Similar to a Spectrogram, this warm-up exercise is used to designate locations on the floor (as opposed to a specific graph or chart) to represent particular psychological or emotional positions in response to express criterion. Group members may be asked to share where they are and then why they chose to stand in those spots. They may also be asked to walk over to another spot near a person who shared something they identified with and tell that person why.
One example of the Locogram entails the **Thinking, Feeling, Wise Mind**: Designate locations for each of these elements or place these words on papers around the room on the floor and then ask members to move through a conflict from each position to discover new, previously inaccessible information; in a group setting, group members can double each of the positions.

Another example of a Locogram is the **Happy, Sad, Angry, Scared**: Designate locations or place these words (and/or other emotions) on papers around the room on the floor and then ask members to move toward the appropriate words after asking questions such as “Which emotion do you express easily?” “Which one gets you into trouble?” “Which one was prominent or created problems in your family of origin?” Allow for sharing after each movement (i.e.: “I am standing here because . . .”).

**Social Atoms**: Diagram or picture that represents the nucleus of all individuals to whom we are emotionally related, intended to help us reflect on, understand, and possibly modify the relationships we have with significant people in our lives. The Social Atom can also be done in action. It can be done for any time—past, present, or future—helping the person to coalesce a variety of influences and understand them in an organized fashion. When done in action, you can use additional psycho dramatic tools, such as role reversal or doubling, to deepen understanding of your client’s social atom and its impacts.

An example of the Social Atom includes the **Worlds of Addiction and Recovery** in which the protagonist identifies and reflects on messages received while in addiction (in one area of the designated stage space); while in recovery (in a different area of the designated stage space); and while in wise mind or bridge position (in a third area of the stage space that offers a view of both of the previously used areas of the stage). Social atoms can also be used to explore relationships with entities such as food, justice system, or other social institutions, etc.
More Exercises/Tools

Concretizing Ambivalence: Protagonist identifies a time when they felt ambivalent, having two similarly strong feelings in opposition about. Invite the protagonist to separate that person (or themselves) into two parts and say what they have to say with those parts (i.e.: separate the part of dad who takes me to games and the part of dad who yells at me; OR the part of me who loves dad and the part of me that is angry with dad, etc.). Can be used with an empty chair, group members assigned roles, or both.

Clock on the Floor: This exercise often helps bring to light subtle rhythms and patterns that may be impacting your client. Invite your client to walk around an imaginary clock on the floor and stop on times that impact them. Examples could include times of day that are: easiest/hardest to stay clean and sober, get along with family members, get motivated, etc. You can also take information from one time of day and help transfer it to another. For example: say something about what's happening during that time of day when it's easiest to stay sober; now walk around the clock again, and find the time of day when you feel most triggered to use. Say something about what's going on at that time of day. Now go back to the first time, and see if there's something that you could bring from the first time of day over to the second one to help.

Timelines: This exercise provides a way to easily move through time, accessing information from either the past or the future (i.e.: looking at movement through a journey of sobriety, of a relationship, etc.). This exercise can be used as an exploration of particular issues, as a way to create hope, vision, or intuitive information about the future, or as a closure. Examples could include:

1) "Walk back in time on the timeline and stop at three times or places when you have felt this way before." (One helpful directive to add to all timelines: "You don't have to have a clue when and where you are going to stop. Just start walking back in time on the timeline, and let your body find the times and places you need to go."
2) "Move forward X number of years into the future on the timeline when you have completely solved this problem. As yourself from the future, tell or show yourself (on the timeline) three steps you took to get to where you are now."

3) "Move through the timeline of your therapy experience and stop at three significant moments or turning points along the way."

This exercise can also be used as a warm-up or as a general biography by inviting the client to simply walk back in time from the present moment to the moment of their birth, stop at three significant moments or places, and in each place, tell you where and when they are. (Note: if you are not yet trained in containing trauma or working with trauma, do not use the backwards timelines until you have had such training, since the connections between past trauma and current, seemingly unrelated issues can be surprising for both the client and the therapist.)

**Angle of Opportunity:** A variation of a Timeline used when someone is making a choice between two options. Invite a person to stand and identify option A by noting three time frames in the future in a direction that is 90 degrees to the right (i.e. 3 months, 1 year, 5 years, etc.). Have them step into each of those time frames and speak from that “reality” as if they are in that future time having made decision A. Then repeat the process for decision B. Discuss the differences and note the feelings attached to those possibly different outcomes. Some follow-up questions could be: "What did you notice?" "How did you feel as you were walking on each line?" "Did anything surprise you?"

**Family Photo/Sculpting:** Invite the protagonist to assign roles to group members and set up a family photo or pose as if it were his or her family photo, assigning a line to each “family member” if wanted. Optional movements include: showing the "photo op" version of the family, then showing the real family, picking a time of the day and sculpting a typical moment in a typical day, holiday photo, at the dinner table (speaking their truth to each family member),
or sculpt the relationships as you experience them emotionally. Future Projection Sculpture is a variation that entails sculpting a here and now relationship and then a future, transformed relationship between two people, a whole family, relationships at work, etc.

**No Fail Story Structure:** This structure is used to invite children and families (when you have adults who are willing to participate) to create spontaneous stories. As often happens in play therapy, when given access to their spontaneity, children often create the perfect metaphors to express and work through what ever they need to address. The key of the structure is to pretend that you have forgotten the story, and then ask the kids to fill in the blanks. It sounds a bit like this:

"Once upon a time there was a... Oh, a... Rats! I can't remember what it was ..." (By this time, the kids have usually caught on to the game and have already been filling in the blanks, but if they haven't, you can prompt them) ... "What was it?" The story continues on in the following structure:

- Once upon a time there was a... named...
- Every day...
- But then one day...
- And then...
- And then...
- And then...
- Until finally...

You can invite the children to act out all or parts of the story, trading characters if they like. You can also read or recite well-known fairytales and invite kids to act out key scenes. It is often therapeutic for children to get to play different roles in a scene, and in particular, to get to play roles that are different than the kinds of roles they play in ordinary life (i.e. a "nice," quiet kid gets to play the troll; the smallest child in the group gets to play the big Billy goat, etc.). Before acting out any scenes of conflict, practice the safety tools of the “drama therapy spacesuit,” slow motion action, and no touching.
Resources for More Information about Psychodrama

Practitioners/Organizations:

- Hudson Valley Psychodrama Institute, 156 Bellevue Road, Highland, NY 12528, (845) 255-7502 www hvpi.net
- Bay Area Moreno Institute, San Francisco and San Rafael, CA, (415) 454-7308 http://www.bayareamorenoinstitute.com/
- American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, 301 N. Harrison Street, #508, Princeton, NJ 08540, (609) 737-8500 http://www.asgpp.org
- The Sociometric Institute, 19 W. 34th ST. Penthouse, New York, NY, 10001, (212) 947-7111 www.sociometricinstitute.com

Books/Videos:

- *The Living Stage: A Step-by-Step Guide to Psychodrama, Sociometry and Experiential Group Therapy* by Tian Dayton, Ph.D., TEP
- *A Clinician's Guide to Psychodrama* by Eva Leveton
- *Acting-In: Practical Applications of Psychodramatic Methods* by Adam Blatner, MD
- *What is Psychodrama?* Nan Nally-Seif LCSW, DCSW, TEP https://youtu.be/wNUfOpsL3NY