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**USING SOCIODRAMA TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING**

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Sociodrama was founded by a young doctor, Jacob Moreno, in response to the upheaval and horror of World War I. Moreno worked in a children’s hospital and in refugee camps in Vienna. Drawing on each person’s potential to be spontaneous and creative, Moreno developed therapeutic methodologies and techniques, all action-based, which he titled the psychodramatic method.

I was introduced to Moreno’s methods in classes at the University of Denver taught by Elwood Murray, a pioneer in the study of interpersonal communication. Over the years I have employed many of his techniques, and I have found them especially valuable in teaching in the area of training and development.

For a number of years I taught a course for teachers who had just completed student teaching. The course was designed to aid the students with problems in classroom communication. One activity which was a predominant part of the course employed the use of sociodramatic techniques. Each student described an interpersonal problem he or she had encountered in the classroom. Then

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each situation was enacted based on the student’s experience using the sociodramatic method. In the lively discussion and reenactment that followed, numerous alternative communication strategies were discovered.

Over the years a number of students returning to campus have told me how they benefited from those sociodrama sessions — that as they went out in life and faced similar problems, they asked themselves, “What would we have done with this in Speech 407?”

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_Psychodrama_ is used to describe Moreno’s method of using spontaneous drama to help people come to terms with or to solve their personal problems. The aim is education and change. _Sociodrama_ differs from psychodrama, as the subject is the group rather than the individual. The theme is an agreed upon group problem. The procedure aims for education plus action for creative social change. Ken Sprague of the International Center for Psychodrama and Sociodrama explains:

Psychodrama looks at the roots of a problem, while sociodrama looks at the soil in which our collective roots are formed or deformed. Sociodrama treats the sickness of society that in turn makes its members ill. There has never been a better time for treatment. (Wiener, 1997, p.105)

While psychodrama focuses on the internal interactions of one man, sociodrama focuses on individuals in the process of interaction. Moreno defines sociodrama as a deep action method dealing with group relations. (1953, p.87) He explains that in psychodrama the attention of the director is upon the individual and his private problems which are unfolded before a group. Although the group approach is used, psychodrama is individual centered and is concerned with a group of private individuals. By contrast, with sociodrama, the subject is the group. Moreno explains that sociodrama is based on the assumption that the group formed by the audience is already organized by the social and cultural roles which in some degree all the carriers of the culture share. (1953, p.87) The group in sociodrama corresponds to the individual in psychodrama.

Psychodrama deals with personal problems and personal catharsis. Sociodrama approaches social problems in groups and aims at social catharsis. (Moreno, 1953, p.88). Both psychodrama and sociodrama focus on spontaneity which operates in the present, now and here. The individual and group are pro-
pelled toward an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation.

Sociodrama as a social learning activity based in a group setting explores a problem which reflects the interests of the group members. This can range from developing interpersonal skills to exploring racial diversity within a community. Moreno saw the sociodramatist as having the task to enter communities confronted with social issues and to help them in handling and clarifying the situation.

Every role is a fusion of private and collective elements; it is composed of two parts — its collective denominators and its individual differentials. It may be useful to differentiate between role-taking — which is the taking of a finished, fully established role which does not permit the individual any variation, any degree of freedom — role playing — which permits the individual some degree of freedom — and role creating — which permits the individual a high degree of freedom, as for instance, the spontaneity player. (Moreno, 1953, p.75)

Kellerman (1996) explains three applications of sociodrama: first, in tackling traumatic events and social crises such as in critical incident debriefings; second, in response to political change and social disintegration; and third, in addressing social diversity, such as issues of racism.

In summary, sociodrama has three primary aims: an improved understanding of a social situation, an increase in participants’ knowledge about their own and other people’s roles in relation to that situation, and an emotional release or catharsis as people express their feelings about the subject. Sociodrama is an action-oriented method based on the belief that people learn best if they can be involved in exploring issues from a variety of perspectives engaging both thoughts and feelings.

**Sociodrama as a Training Method**

Moreno reports that, as early as 1952, sociodrama was employed as a training method in major United States industries. He notes that the use of sociodramatic techniques for training is most effective when there is similarity between the setup of the subject community to that of the community outside. (1953, p.531) The better defined the social reality, the more effective the sociodramatic method will be. Since the modern trend is toward increasing complexity and differentiation (p.532), today’s training with sociodrama should emphasize spontaneity, resourcefulness, and flexibility. (p.533)
Moreno advises orienting sociodrama participants not towards an emotional experience and conflict in the past, but towards a task in the “present.” (1953, p.568) Action patterns and involvement should be developed in reference to the present situation. The sociodramatic leader should not write the plot, the characters, and the dialogue on paper, but should help the players themselves move into creative action. (1953, pp.568-569) He serves as a suggester and guide. He prepares the group for creative problem solving.

When sociodrama is used in training, Ottawa points out the focus is on interpersonal behavior in the existing group and not on personal therapy. (1966, p.4) The members come together to gain more insight into interpersonal relations and human motivation. Peterson and Sorenson point out that similar problems recur in groups, and at the beginning, at least, it is good to stick with those problems which do recur and that participants find relevant. (1991, pp.515-517)

The primary uses of sociodrama as a training tool are for working with diverse staff in learning more about changing roles within the organization, and as part of a team-building process in discovering more about social problems and exploring issues of diversity.

**Sociodrama Methods**

As the sociometrist works with various relationships (co-workers, manager/staff, family, etc.) he/she develops expertise in the role definition process. It is helpful to keep lists of roles for use as examples or guides; however, clients should be urged to generate a listing of roles which reflect the uniqueness of their relationship. This is illustrated in the following diagram presented by Hale (1981, p.118).

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You          Role          Me
Relationship

What would you be
If I were not?
What would I be
If you were not?
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From *Words of the Father, No. 101*, by J.L. Moreno

Pike offers five methods to keep interest high with role-playing. (1991, pp.3-4) Pike also discusses the importance of enthusiasm on the part of the
trainer, and he suggests having several case studies available to help groups get started. (1989, pp.31-32) Several sample cases are presented in *Creative Training Techniques* (1989).

Byre suggests the importance of knowing something about the backgrounds and situations of those with whom one will be working. (1989) The director will be more effective if she/he understands participants’ frames of reference. Byre points out that it is the director’s responsibility to facilitate and the students’ responsibility to learn. The director of sociodrama should keep in mind that the purpose of the sociodrama is to provide the opportunity for deepened sensitivity and insight into problems, so that improved intergroup relations may occur.

Evan Ringer, at the Global Center for Diversity and Management, Katz & Associates, reports that sociodrama is used in their diversity training. (Ringer, 1998) Sociodrama is created to involve participants in spontaneous drama that is similar to situations occurring in the client’s environment and as a springboard for in-depth discussion. Participants have an opportunity to discuss the issues they face without exposing themselves or sensitive information about their colleagues. It gives everyone a common context for discussing these issues in the future when similar situations arise at work. In diversity training the drama is relevant to the participants’ special environment and not just a showcase of stereotypes.

**Preparing for sociodrama**

The sociodrama workshop is led by a director who ensures that the session achieves its aims in a safe and creative way. The director needs to know how to work with groups and should have some training in psycho/sociodrama along with knowledge of creative techniques and counseling. The director needs to know the type of group he/she is to work with — either a group designated to use sociodrama as a method, or a group meeting for another task, such as managing change or working with diversity, where sociodrama may be the most appropriate tool. The appropriateness of sociodrama can be determined by:

1. The learning outcomes. A very task-oriented group may see sociodrama as irrelevant.
2. Time constraints. Successful sociodrama requires enough time to create a safe working environment.
3. Skill of the director. Sociodrama should only be used when the director has the ability to deal with whatever issues surface.

4. The setting. Space needs to be adequate and physically safe for sociodrama.

There are additional considerations in sociodrama dealing with power and discrimination. If, for example, the director is male, middle-class and heterosexual, how might he be biased to what is going on for certain group members? How might the trainees perceive him? Also, the director should be aware of group membership and how it might feel for people from less powerful groups. If one is black in a group of white people, or a woman in a group of males, how can the director make the sociodrama safe for them and find a way to empower these individuals? The director should be prepared for the sociodrama by finding out about the group and the subject matter in advance. Research concerning the group may be necessary. The director should be able to “hear” what is being said and inferred. The director should be ready to understand and feel what is happening in the group.

The Warm-up

The first stage of sociodrama is the warm-up. This includes warm-up of the director and the group.

The director. The director needs to personally prepare for the sociodrama if the group is to function effectively. This includes getting a feel for the environment and planning the space for action. The director needs to consider how the group will work around a theme, and the director should prepare for the emergence of themes from the group and should remember that groups often resist themes that are imposed on them. The director needs to work for spontaneity with scenes and roles created by participants. Likewise, the director needs to be creative, energized, and lively.

The group. Individuals participating need to be turned into a group. Activities should be planned to help the members know one another. For example, individuals in small groups could tell short stories of how they happened to be at the meeting.

The physical environment. The director should help participants feel comfortable in the room by having them move around the space, touching every wall, etc.

Safety in the group. The director should demonstrate competence at the beginning of the session welcoming the members and giving a preview of the
day’s activities. Rules of confidentiality and respect for what others say should be stressed. It should be made clear that the status and power in the “outside” world have no relevance in the sociodrama setting. Individuals should feel comfortable and that they “are in good hands.”

**Physical warm-up of participants.** Some physical exercises can be used to energize the group. Participants might be instructed to move around the room with various attitudes: assertively, aggressively, and submissively. In pairs, one person with eyes shut can be led around the room silently by another. Small groups of individuals can be positioned to create a machine which moves with appropriate sounds.

**Warm-up for sociodramatic “acting.”** Sociodrama calls for a type of acting, and it is helpful to have participants not worry about the possibility of “feeling silly.” The director could have them carry out some actions, such as walking to meet one another pretending to be long-lost friends, secret lovers, teacher and pupil, etc. An object could be passed around the room with people having to mime using the object, for example, a ruler being used as a pen or a comb.

The preliminary warm-up is very important. This must be done well for the rest of the session to proceed effectively.

**Determining the Group Theme for Sociodrama.**

The director should help the group to determine the issue on which they will be working, unless this has been predetermined. Even if the theme has been set, the group will need to work together to find the particular aspects to be approached. This can be done in several ways. The following are a few suggestions.

First, group members can talk in smaller groups about what issue(s) is/are currently important to them. These might be shared with the group as a whole or one small group may join another to see if they can agree on a theme. If there are several good possibilities, the director can help the group make a sociometric choice by designating several areas of the room, each representing a possible topic. Individuals can then move to the part of the room that reflects the issue they most want to tackle. The issue with the most interest would then be the one with which the group would begin.

Second, the director could lay out a number of photos (representing the racial, ethnic, gender, class, and disability mix in society) showing varied situations and attitudes and ask the group to choose the photo with which they most identify.
Third, newspapers can be used. The director can have participants find stories that grab their attention. Some form of sociometric choice can be made by having group members choose the story with which they most strongly identify.

**Setting the Scene**

Once the theme is identified, the scene must be set. For example, if the theme revolves around a family problem, questions to be asked include: What type of family? What time of meeting: meal time, watching TV, etc.? In what room is the meeting occurring? What are the physical aspects of the room? Who is there? Who else is in the family? Who could enter the scene? What other roles might be relevant: minister, teacher, neighbor, etc.?

The goal is to build the room and give it meaning and character. A sense of history can be obtained by having one of the members become one of the objects, such as a grandfather clock, and speak about what has happened in this room.

Roles of the members of the group, as for instance the family, need to be created. It is often effective to allow individuals to volunteer for the roles. In order to help them feel and become that person, the director should question them. This can be done by asking, “Tell us something about you,” “Tell us about your family.” As the roles are played, universal aspects of the roles often emerge, and this helps group members to build strong identifications.

**Structuring the Action**

Sociodrama is a creative activity which develops its own momentum by the way the actors play the roles and create new ones. There must be some organization and structure, however, to prevent chaos. The director needs to inform participants when others can join in.

The action can take many forms. Individuals should have the option of leaving a role if they like, by going to a “non-action” space in the room. Although an individual may take one role initially, he/she might decide to play another as the sociodrama progresses. Sometimes a role can be held by a chair, so that whoever sits in the designated chair takes on that role temporarily.

In sociodrama the concern is with what is said and what is thought or felt. This can be accomplished by “doubling,” where one role speaks for or comments on another. If roles are held by people sitting in chairs, then doubling could be indicated by people standing behind the relevant chairs. If people in roles are standing and moving about, putting a hand on the shoulder could indicate doubling.
The Action

The Role of the Director. One of the functions of the director is to determine which part of the action to highlight. The director also needs to keep the action flowing, and decide where the scene should go next and when it is finished.

The director needs to keep an eye on the participants and see who might like to join in, who might look uncomfortable with what they are experiencing, who is wanting to get out of a role, who might learn from taking another role.

The director needs to be aware of what is happening and make appropriate changes. The action might be stopped to allow an individual to express what is happening to him/her. The director might quietly suggest a role. The director might indicate that it is a good time for role reversal. Sometimes a person needs to be moved out of a role to be able to observe what is happening rather than being overwhelmed by it.

Energy. If sociodrama is going to work, it needs energy. This can be assured by taking time to thoroughly warm-up the group. The theme has to be an issue the group as a whole wants to address. The scene needs to allow feelings to be addressed. People need to be engaged with their roles. The roles in the scene should allow plenty of freedom and not be too limited.

If energy seems to leave a scene, it might be because there is nothing more to say. It is completed. It might be that the scene is too powerful, and some people become defensive and lack a feeling of safety. Others may feel that the scene is relevant to only one or two members. Sometimes the director will need to move the scene from the specific to the general to explore what is universal and then bring it back to the group.

Difficult roles. Some roles are difficult to play. One role that is particularly troubling for some is the role of an evil person, for instance, a racist. When finished playing one of the roles, the individual needs to be “de-roled” at the end and separated from the role in the eyes of the group. This can be accomplished by having the role held by a chair, so people can come and briefly sit while making a statement. This allows a number of people to participate and get a view of the perspective.

It is also difficult for people to play a role which is alien to them, as a man playing a woman, or a white playing a black. There is a need to play these roles with respect and to understand that actors will likely start in a stereotypical way. These roles can be built through questioning, group members doubling the person, role reversal, and group discussion.
Techniques

There are a number of techniques available to move the action. The following are some examples:

**Sculpting.** While sculpting, the director physically places individuals to show how they are perceived to relate. For example, arm in arm, back to back, a stiff pose with a pointed finger, the manner in which they look at one another, etc. The director can then let the people holding the roles begin to speak. Participants can also be taken out of the sculpt and allowed to view it. Stepping out can allow the person time to reflect on it and perhaps change the sculpt. Group members should be given a chance to comment on the sculpt. Sculpting can also be used to find a group theme.

**Doubling.** Doubling is where one group member puts him/herself beside a person in a role and gives voice to that person’s unspoken thoughts and feelings. The more a doubler copies the posture and actions of the person they are doubling, the more effective it is. Doubling can be used to expand a role by expressing the unsaid aspects of an interaction. It can be used to show that there is something else the character could say rather than just thinking it. Doubling can be used to give support to someone in the role. The director may assign permanent doubles for the entire session, or the director can have members double for a time and then move out of the action. Sometimes a double may take over the role.

**Voices.** “Voices” is really another form of doubling. Voices might include: the women’s movement, church, sanctity of the family, government, woman not wanting children, older persons views from historical perspectives, etc. Sometimes these individuals can come in as doubles, and at other times, they can be heard “off stage.” In this way all participants can contribute to the action.

**Role reversal.** With role reversal one person moves out of one role and into another. It is often used in a confrontational scene when it is beneficial for one person to get an understanding of how the situation looks from another perspective.

**Soliloquy.** With this, the director stops the action to gives a person space and time to say what is going on inside him/her. This helps the individual explore the role in a way the scene does not allow.

**Ending**

Sociodrama begins with a scene, moves to broader issues, then returns with fresh insights. At the end of the action there is time for sharing. People may share what they have learned from playing different roles. Some individuals
may share what the experience was like for them and the emotional release which they may have felt. Group members may share what they have learned about the group theme, social situation, or issue explored. All viewpoints should be respected. The group and director can share feelings about how the sociodrama unfolded and what learning took place. Sometimes it is good to take a break, to allow participants to step out of the process, before they review what occurred. Discussion should assist participants and audience to realize motivations, purposes, behavior, implications and possibilities for prevention of problem situations.

REFERENCES


