

HOW CAN PSYCHODRAMA HELP A FAMILY THERAPIST?

With regard to your own personal growth experience, turning to almost any other therapist of another discipline takes you from beyond the insulation of your accustomed setting. It should be a relief not to find yourself second guessing how another is processing the data you offer. Those who straddle borders are somehow seen as marginal, but on the other hand, they can more readily shed light into the dark corners of our daily functioning. Now I turn from an invitation to experience psychodrama for yourself to your using it professionally with families.

For ease of presentation please indulge my introducing technical language in **bold letters**, not for emphasis, but to alert you to our specific usage. For example, I speak of the **protagonist** as the one whose story is unfolding, and of the **director**, you who facilitate the protagonist's self-presentation. In this respect directors are more like family therapists than are psychoanalysts and Rogerians---who are not as nondirective as they imagine.

Psychodrama is a rich method including both strategy and tactics. The ambitious former topic must wait for a later occasion, but for the moment consider it congruent with Murray Bowen's approach. Here I focus on basic technique. Every therapist **doubles** within himself as his client speaks. We call it 'empathy.' Psychodramatists go a step further:

1) We do it out loud, speaking of feelings we sense, as if we were the **protagonists**.

2) The protagonist (=client) is free to respond to doubling in two ways:

a) by picking up on it, and saying aloud all the stronger what he's been softpeddling. He may be constrained by socially conditioned habits, Or

b) the **protagonist** may correct what we've "misunderstood." Perhaps we're premature, or too eager with interpretation. We don't argue. Immediately the double shows he accepts 'correction' through dutifully repeating the protagonist's perception. Are we not all final authorities on what we feel, so that, for the moment, it's beyond discussion? You'll note how doubling instantly facilitates the flow of client output.

If you're the only one there who knows the technique, you are the model double, wearing two hats.. But be of good cheer, others catch on right away even doing the first session, and then you'll delegate. This takes some of the heat off the therapist, and dilutes the transference. If you're psychoanalytic, you may not want to do that, but clients are ever grateful, and therapists find the misperceptions of transference much easier to handle when the evidence is spread around.

The big plus is that your client feels supported. Now when an interpretation is called for, he's more likely to hear you. Besides, family therapy is an interpersonal situation, and doubling has the merit of bringing the inner self out of the closet into the full light of shared daylight.

Be careful to police one boundary: We declare "No one hears the double but the protagonist. What the double says is not fair game for anyone else," neither family nor therapist---only what the protagonist validates---or contradicts.

You may be surprised to read that the disclaimer applies to the therapist too, if there's no one to double. Usually someone else is doubling. Inner doubling is already going on in everyone else's mind, who's paying attention. To avoid confusion we permit only one person to double at a time. If anyone is sure he can do better, with therapist and client permission, the **director** may excuse the first double and let another try his hand. He may also bring the other double back!

We may ask anyone present in the room to take an **auxiliary** role for an absentee. How can anyone do that? This is hardly a disturbing affront to the protagonist, who benefits from role reversal, nor to any other who realizes the presentation is from the protagonist's point-of-view..

We set two chairs facing each other, as we do in ordinary discussion. When we have two persons each representing themselves, this is an **encounter**, which is what normally happens in family therapy. Let's take that situation a little further, where the protagonist is in one chair, while the chair opposite is empty. The protagonist imagines a significant person in the other chair. Call the protagonist "Tom" and the significant other "Ann."

Before Tom can 'helpfully' describe Ann, I say **Reverse Roles**, that is, move from the chair "where you are yourself" to the chair over there and be the (absent) person Ann. I'll speak to you as if you were Ann. You respond to me just as Ann would. In family therapy everyone knows the absent one Ann, and has quite another view. It's Tom's view we want at this time, not theirs. In a few minutes the director interrupts, pointing to the empty chair, saying "We've got to represent the person "who deserted the chair over here. Who could you trust to do that for you?"

Now if Tom had a good double, we slip the same double into the empty chair without further ado. The protagonist-as-the-significant-other Ann speaks to the auxiliary-as-himself playing Tom over there in his own chair. When they "role reverse" back, the two persons trade places. The result is that the protagonist is himself again in his own chair, and the absent other sits there before him. This deepens the emotional level to a climate where therapeutic action happens. The family therapist should attend a few psychodrama sessions to discover the ease with which this may be done.

Here is an example of practical use: One person is relating with another unrealistically. We discover that the other has become like, let us say, the parent he lost (and failed to grieve through). He wasn't there when father died. He must say 'goodbye.'" We set up the hospital room scene with minimal props. The properly prepared auxiliary plays the dying father. This is **surplus reality**, where the protagonist completes the experience life has denied him, tears and all. Among other variations, one may deal with a child, a phantom, or with God, or even with a shadow side of oneself. You have to see it to believe it. It should happen to you.

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