

Surplus Reality: The Magic Ingredient in Psychodrama

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ABSTRACT

Anything that can be imagined can be created on the psychodramatic stage. This is the magic that makes surplus reality a central aspect and powerful tool of Dr. J.L. Moreno's psychodrama method. Through surplus reality a person is able to enter the unknown, live out their fantasies and become the creator of their own life. Using psychodramatic work as illustration, Ali Watersong demonstrates the way that surplus reality facilitates the development of spontaneity, brings about social atom repair and assists in the formation of a positive identity. This article is adapted from the author's 2008 Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association (ANZPA) accreditation thesis, *The Magic of Surplus Reality: Developing Spontaneity and Bringing about Social Atom Repair*.

KEY WORDS

as if, auxiliary ego, concretisation, imagination, locus nascendi, maximisation, neuroscience, protagonist, role reversal, social atom repair, spontaneity, status nascendi, surplus reality, systems theory, unconscious

Introduction

The first time I hear the term 'surplus reality' is when I set out in psychodrama a photo of my mother holding me as an infant. My original experience of being desperately held by my terrified mother is transformed into one of re-mothering by 'The World's Best Mother'. This new experience of being held and cared for in secure, loving, confident arms shows me that it is possible to make new memories in the brain and the body.

In my work conducting psychodrama groups in the community I am stimulated by the power of surplus reality to bring to life a person's inner world so that their fantasies, hopes, fears, dreams, imaginings and unexpressed resentments are enacted on the psychodramatic stage. Women who attend these groups have frequently experienced some form of neglect, abuse or trauma in their formative

years and these core early relationships have become the template for future relationships. Neuroscience research showing that the physical brain structure is shaped by early interpersonal experiences, confirms Moreno's (1953) theories of personality formation and the impact of the original social atom. The social self is developed in response to the child's first social situation (Schoore, 1994). By entering into the realm of surplus reality and calling forth those things which lie outside normal life, old ways of functioning are examined and new roles and perceptions are developed. In surplus reality a person re-experiences the old conflict and develops a different warm up and new response, resulting in social atom repair.

As I apply psychodrama in my work I am developing my dramatic artistry and creative imagination. My ability to work with and play in the unknown is increasing. The more I use surplus reality the more I appreciate its magic and potential to transform and expand the human spirit.

Surplus Reality and Moreno

Dr J.L. Moreno coined the term surplus reality to refer to the situation in a psychodrama where a person is enacting something that exists in her imagination and subjective reality. It involves the expression of those things that are above and beyond what is normally expressed in life. Moreno was influenced by Marx's concept of surplus value.

Surplus value is part of the earnings of the worker of which he is robbed by capitalistic employers. But surplus reality is, in contrast, not a loss but an enrichment of reality by the investments and extensive use of imagination. This expansion of experience is made possible in psychodrama by methods not used in life — auxiliary egos, auxiliary chair, double, role reversal, mirror, magic shop, the high chair, the psychodramatic baby, soliloquy, rehearsal of life, and others.

Moreno (1965:212-213)

Moreno (1972a) defined psychodrama as the science which investigates the truth by dramatic methods. This psychological truth consists of all aspects of a person's experience, her inner and outer worlds. Psychodrama provides the bridge between objective reality and this inner subjective reality. Surplus reality enables the invisible, intangible dimensions of life that have not been fully experienced or expressed, to be concretised and enacted. Past, present and future events that are a reality in the imagination can all be displayed in the present on the psychodrama stage. Moreno knew that he could not truly meet the psyche of the protagonist unless he lived in the surplus reality together with the protagonist.

Zerka Moreno (2000:18) values surplus reality highly. "The deepest catharsis in psychodrama comes from doing those scenes, those interactions, those moments that do not, cannot, and are not ever likely to happen in real life, for

whatever reason.” The use of surplus reality to express powerful emotions such as rage, provides an outlet that prevents acting out and frees up the underlying feelings of grief and longing in a catharsis of integration, as demonstrated in the following illustration.

Murdering Mother

Sue’s childhood has been punctuated by frequent physical and verbal abuse and as a result her adult life is chaotic, characterised by rejection and self-destructive behaviours. She is very angry, but her anger has been turned inwards and expressed through depression and self-harming behaviour. In a workshop Sue warms up to her relationship with her dead Nana from whom she did experience love.

A scene is set out in the hospital where Nana is critically ill. Sue tells Nana that she loves her, something she was unable to do at the time. Sue’s mother minimises the seriousness of Nana’s condition and Sue becomes very angry. Her anger is maximised. The following dialogue takes place.

- Sue I’m disgusted. This is your mother. She’s really sick.
Mother She’ll be all right. Stop making a fuss. You’re just upset because of your mental illness.
Sue I hate you. You never wanted me. You always rejected me. And you’re doing it to Nana. She’s your mother!
Sue *turning to the director* . . . I want to kill her!
Director This is psychodrama. Anything can be enacted here. How do you want to kill her?
Sue I want to hit her with the shovel and then bury her!

The new scene is enacted. Props are organised to assist the safe expression of anger on stage¹. Sue warms up quickly and experiences a catharsis of rage as she hits cushions held in front of the auxiliary playing her mother. She shouts at her mother. “It’s not me who’s mentally ill, it’s you!” She yells and screams and continues to hit her mother until she is spent. She enlists group members to help her bury the body. Turning to her Nana, Sue weeps as she expresses her grief. Nana embraces her, saying “I love you. It wasn’t your fault that your parents rejected you”. Sue cries with relief as she experiences in word and action her Nana’s love and acceptance.

In acting out her murderous fantasy in this surplus reality enactment, the protagonist is able to release and integrate violent feelings that have become frozen in time. Anger often overlays feelings of loss and dependency and the need for love and acknowledgment, because it is more accessible than vulnerability. The catharsis of rage allows the underlying grief and longing to be experienced and as a result, Sue experiences a sense of mastery and empowerment.

In a drama such as this, the sharing phase is important to assist the protagonist

to move from the surplus reality where she is in an altered state back to the here and now reality with the group. Sharing is a way to ground and reintegrate the protagonist, as well as a time for group members to de-role and connect up with one another.

Surplus Reality, Concretisation and the Auxiliary Ego

Concretisation is the surplus reality technique that makes the protagonist's private world tangible by representing individuals, absentees, delusions, hallucinations, symbols, ideals, animals and objects on the stage in a concrete way. It allows the protagonist to experience physically what has been experienced psychologically. The psychodramatist says, "Don't tell me, show me". The task of the auxiliary ego is to portray the protagonist's perceptions of the internal figures dominating her world, so that they can be encountered externally. In talking about the function of the auxiliary role, Moreno (1965) stresses the therapeutic use of bodily contact to give the subject the warmth and immediacy of life, not only in words but in action. For example, if there has been an absence of care and nurturing in childhood a person may need to experience in surplus reality a 'new' mother or father who can hold and hug her, and act in ways she wishes her mother or father had acted (Moreno, 1972a).

Healing Dad

Jane has difficulty speaking up in the group. She warms up to a scene when she is three years old. She is holding hands with her father as they walk down the street. She skips happily beside him. Suddenly he shouts aggressively at her to stop. She immediately freezes. With maximisation and doubling from the director she curls up in a foetal position, crying and terrified. This urge to curl up and cry is enacted fully. Jane is then invited to step outside the scene and choose an auxiliary to act for her in the scene. After a full re-enactment she warms up to comforting her child self. She eases the little girl's fears, holding her securely, stroking her and talking to her. Gradually the child relaxes.

In this scene Jane warms up to what Moreno (1972a) calls the *locus nascendi* and *status nascendi*, the place and moment when it begins. This is the magic of surplus reality. We can enact any moment in someone's subjective experience of life as if it is occurring here and now. Withdrawing and going silent in response to harsh treatment was Jane's childhood survival strategy. However this time Jane is not alone. With doubling and maximisation she expresses the fear and distress she could not bring out in the original situation. Maximisation is a technique that expands and intensifies experiences of the psyche far beyond what is possible in ordinary life. This new expression is more physiologically consistent than the adaptive coping response of withdrawal. The enactment in surplus reality has enabled Jane to give and receive love and care at a deep feeling level.

Jane is now free to be authentic with her father, Henry. A new scene is

produced involving him and his parents. His father died when he was six months old. His mother married a man who mistreated her and Henry. As Henry, Jane warms up and expresses grief to the father he never knew. Turning to Jane he embraces her saying, "I love you but I couldn't show you". In role reversal Jane weeps as she feels her father's love.

In this enactment, the use of surplus reality facilitates the exploration of multi-generational experience. With enquiry there is an expansion of thinking and feeling, and the beliefs, values and culture of the family system become clear. Systems theory is an integral part of Moreno's work. Once one part of the system has changed and become more spontaneous, there is the possibility of change and increased spontaneity in other parts of the system.

In surplus reality the borders between objective reality and fantasy are dissolved and the boundaries of sex, death and age are transcended. On the psychodrama stage Jane reverses roles with her father, experiences the world through his eyes and expresses the grief that he has been carrying his whole life. There is a further catharsis of integration that enables Jane to forgive and reconcile with her Dad. Social atom repair has occurred. One of the core therapeutic tasks of psychodrama is accomplished through surplus reality, and that is the development of a cluster of progressive roles to repair the lack of doubling and mirroring in the original social atom.

Surplus Reality, 'As-If', Imagination and Play

The entire method of psychodrama is based on the principle of 'as-if' and the use of imagination.

Psychodrama is a way to change the world in the HERE AND NOW using the fundamental rules of imagination without falling into the abyss of illusion, hallucination or delusion. The human brain is the vehicle of imagination. Psychodrama, in training the imagination, overcomes the differences which hinder communication between the sexes, between the races, the generations, the sick and the healthy, between people and animals, between people and objects, between the living and the dead. The simple methods of psychodrama give us courage, return to us our lost unity with the universe, and re-establish the continuity of life.

Moreno's Magic Charter of Psychodrama (1972b:131)

Surplus reality is a way of extending and focussing the capacity for imagination and play. The development of the imagination transforms consciousness and contributes to the growth of hopefulness, originality, and the ability to entertain new ideas and enter into different realities than our own (Hosking, 1989). The psychodrama stage is viewed 'as-if' it was an imaginary arena in which anything, including the impossible, can happen (Kellermann, 1992). Entering into the world of make believe brings forth the quality that Moreno (1972a) called

dramatic spontaneity, that which gives newness and vitality to feelings, actions and words, and assists in energising and unifying the self. Moreno believed that humans are cosmic beings as well as social beings. In surplus reality the mythic dimension of life can be portrayed. "God is always within and among us, as he is for children. Instead of coming down from the skies, he comes in by way of the stage door. God is not dead, he is alive, in psychodrama!" (Moreno & Moreno, 1975: 22).

Play is an essential human quality and the ability to play is fundamental to healing. Winnicott (1971) argues that in play the child or adult is free to be creative and use the whole personality, and that through creativity the individual discovers the self. The emphasis on play, imagination, intuition and creativity in surplus reality gives psychodrama its magical quality, as illustrated in the following scenario.

Wonderwoman

During a psychodramatic enactment, Stephanie becomes immobilised as she attempts to confront a childhood abuser. The producer's interventions and attempts to expand the system fail to warm her up in a different way, and she remains stuck. She is coached to call upon Zena Warrior Princess. Stephanie immediately comes alive saying, "I'll get Wonderwoman!" She finds a 'laser gun' and a colourful Wonderwoman cape to wear and organises a fleet of flamingos to be her army. After a vigorous struggle she fights off the perpetrator, expressing her rage and indignation as she does so. She then comforts her frightened child self. She cries as she makes a new relationship with herself, one that is nurturing and protective.

In this example the imagination and creativity of the producer stimulate those of the protagonist. In entering into surplus reality and enacting her fantasy Stephanie increases her playfulness, spontaneity and creativity. Fragmentation is the outcome when there has been childhood abuse, as is the case with Stephanie. As the psychodramatist, it is important to double, to enter the protagonist's world as a compassionate companion and to ensure that re-enactment is not a re-traumatising experience.

Surplus Reality and the Body

There is a saying in psychodrama that the body remembers what the mind forgets. Zerka Moreno (1989) wisely counsels that the body is the royal road to the unconscious. In other words our bodies are communicating with us and others all the time but often we ignore their attempts at conversation. Through physical symptoms and signals the body expresses information that has not yet surfaced into consciousness. Unresolved emotional experiences may be somatised in the body. Concretising bodily experiences in surplus reality increases awareness and gives new insights, as illustrated in the following section.

The Drama of the Body

In a psychodramatic enactment, Lesley feels tension in her head, neck and shoulders and her legs feel achy and weak. Each of these bodily experiences is concretised. Lesley's legs say, "I'm ready to run in case something bad happens!" She remembers that her father used to hit her on her legs when she was little and she would freeze in terror. Lesley is coached to express her feelings to her father, which facilitates a new warm up. No longer a powerless child, she integrates the painful childhood experience and processes it cognitively.

As a child, Lesley's impulse to run away is prevented and she has somatised the experience. Her body stores the fear and the memory of the urge to run, although this memory has not been accessible to her cognition. "The symptoms of trauma are the result of a highly activated incomplete biological response to threat, frozen in time. By enabling this frozen response to thaw, then complete itself, trauma can be healed" (Kellerman, 2000:30). Through surplus reality Lesley gives her legs a voice and is then able to release frozen feelings. Catharsis is an intense body/mind/emotion event. It breaks up body armouring and allows us to experience our bodies in ways that are more appropriate to the present circumstances.

Using surplus reality to enact what is in the body deepens a person's warm up and facilitates greater consciousness. It enables full expression and brings about greater vitality and creativity. By focusing on the physical, the action component of a role is given primacy which allows the feelings to emerge and the mind to be less dominant. Experiencing the world through the body and entering the realm of the emotional, metaphorical and sensory core of our being opens us to a wider range of possibilities. This is the magic of surplus reality.

These ideas are supported by a growing body of psychoneurobiology research into the relationships between the psyche (emotions, spirit), the nervous system (mind, neurons) and biology (body). Social interactions early in life result in the stimulation of both neurotransmitters and neural growth hormones that participate in the active building of the brain (Schoore, 1994). Fear, stress and trauma all affect brain chemistry while trauma memory is stored in the body (Pert, 1999). New neuroscience research also provides evidence that the brain is malleable and is continually being rebuilt. For example, Cozolino (2002) maintains that the involvement of affect and cognition appears necessary in the therapeutic process in order to create the context for the integration of dissociated neural circuits. This can be said to be provided by the surplus reality of psychodramatic enactment whereby a catharsis of integration is achieved with the expression of feeling coupled with cognitive insights. Thus psychodrama with its emphasis on experiential learning in enriched environments provides new positive experiences that stimulate neural plasticity and assist the neural rewiring that is required for new learning. This is a rich area for further research. For example, McVea (2009) is involved in investigations into protagonists' change processes during psychodrama. The impact of psychodramatic enactment on neural functioning could also be investigated using brain imaging technology.

Surplus Reality and the Protagonist

For most people ordinary living requires a degree of restraint and intense feelings tend to be toned down. The freedom from all ordinary conventions in the surplus reality enactment is one of the unique therapeutic potentials of psychodrama. Therapeutic change occurs through a corrective emotional experience as feelings are discharged, accompanied by cognitive insights. Trauma recovery and the undoing and redoing of past negative experiences are made possible through surplus reality. New memories in the brain and body are created as neural functioning is stimulated by the enriched environment in the psychodrama group. Surplus reality enactment increases spontaneity, originality and creativity and the development of a positive identity.

New progressive roles characterised by vitality and flexibility are developed as old roles are modified, old warm ups drop away and the person experiences new strength, creativity and self-acceptance. Warming up to a spontaneous state leads to highly organised patterns of conduct and the individual integrates her feelings, beliefs and actions. As her role repertoire expands with the incorporation of new progressive roles there is more flexibility resulting in more integrated functioning. She builds healthy relationships with people thus creating a new, more life-enhancing social atom.

Surplus Reality and the Psychodramatist

In order to tap the healing power of surplus reality the psychodramatist must have the courage to enter the unknown. A central component of the training is the development of the imagination and the ability to play, so that the producer can participate wholeheartedly in the fantasy world of her protagonist. A person's bodily expression cuts to the core of her experience. Hence the producer of a drama must be alert to body cues and develop the capacity to notice the smallest movement or flicker of facial expression and bring it to consciousness. Surplus reality can also be used to expand a person's experience of the sociodramatic influences of gender, race, class, sexuality and able-bodyism.

The ability to access and stay alive to the roles of *magician*, *spontaneous actor*, *playful companion* and *believer in the creative genius* will enhance the potency of the practitioner. By using the dimension of surplus reality the psychodramatist is modelling a way of being in the world that unleashes a person's power to be spontaneous, and assists her to achieve her own creative potential.

Surplus Reality Extended

Writers since Moreno have extended the concept of surplus reality. Blatner (2003) notes that the root of the word imagination is 'magic'. He encourages the psychodramatist to develop her role as magician by use of symbols, 'familiar' and incantations, to invoke magical powers by opening her mind to channel the

unnameable spirits of intuition and imagination. Blomkvist and Rutzel (1994) view surplus reality as an instrument of disintegration and chaos. In surplus reality one moves from the known to the unknown where the ego's ability to control and understand ceases. "When the drama enters the stage the protagonist and the director are in the hands of the drama and not vice versa" (p.238). The purpose of the psychodrama is not to find a solution but to allow full expression.

Kipper (2000) describes the Experiential Reintegration Model (ERM) that focuses on using psychodramatic enactment to alter a person's experiential pool. Undoing and redoing are fundamental surplus reality techniques which allow here and now changes to develop. Deliberately dissolving boundaries on the stage and temporarily removing the limitations imposed by time, space and actual reality results in powerful therapeutic effects. Hudgins (2002) developed the Therapeutic Spiral Model to assist in social atom repair with trauma survivors by using surplus reality to enact scenes of restoration and repair. Surplus reality allows for a broad systemic perspective on the socio-political culture in which a protagonist has developed. The spirit of patriarchy, of colonisation or of the Catholic Church, for example, can be concretised and enacted, bringing forth the values and ideas of the dominant culture that impact on a person's role development.

Conclusion

The psychodrama method assists people to fully experience all aspects of their subjective and objective worlds. On the psychodrama stage they examine old ways of functioning, develop new ways of being, reorganise roles and bring about social atom repair. The magic of surplus reality lies in the use of the imagination and play in this endeavour. It allows us to go beyond the prosaic and mundane and dare to live out our fantasies and imaginings. Enactment in surplus reality wakes up the senses and brings us alive as we experience ourselves and others in the here and now. For a period we live in Kairos time rather than Chronos time². As we experience our creative genius we develop new ways of being, we strengthen our ability to love and accept ourselves, we expand our capacity to give and receive love, and we increase our enjoyment of life.

Surplus reality in psychodrama addresses our deep hunger to explore creative potential by experiencing and expressing all that we are and expanding into the abundance of life.

END NOTES

1. A range of techniques is used to assist the safe expression of anger and rage on the psychodrama stage: group members hold big cushions for the protagonist to kick, punch or push against;

batons or strips of sheeting with a knot tied at the end are used to smash the floor or a cushion; the protagonist is coached to breathe deeply and bring the sound out from the belly so there is no strain on the larynx; several people hold the protagonist firmly by the legs, arms and shoulders, so that she must use all her strength to free herself; the protagonist lies on a mattress on the floor while several people hold her down and she then fights them off; auxiliaries need to provide enough resistance safely so that the protagonist feels the constraint and fights hard but not so much that she cannot break free; group members double the protagonist as she expresses anger to avoid a warm up to shame.

2. The ancient Greeks had two words for time, *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* refers to chronological or sequential time. *Kairos* means the right or opportune moment to act. It signifies an undetermined period of time in which something special happens. It has a qualitative eternal nature where awareness of everyday time diminishes and one is very present.

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