

The Imago Affair

JACOB MORENO'S *INTERPERSONAL THERAPY* AND HARVILLE HENDRIX'S
RELATIONSHIP THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

Jacob Moreno's Psychodrama Interpersonal Therapy and Harville Hendrix's Imago Relationship Therapy, while different, have much in common. The meaning and origin of encounter and dialogue, and the contrast between locus and focus, are discussed with reference to ways they can be fostered. The question of professional identity and identification with a modality is raised. Some general conclusions are reached regarding the boundaries between psychodrama and other modalities.

KEY WORDS

dialogue, empathy, encounter, imago, mirroring, modalities, professional identity, psychodrama, psychotherapy, role reversal, validation

Introduction

A colleague once told me that she was married to Transactional Analysis and was having an affair with psychodrama. Psychodrama has formed the basis of my psychotherapy practice for many years. More recently I have immersed myself in Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT). Did I have an affair? Was there some sort of betrayal? This article documents what I have learned about psychodrama and Imago and my experience of relating to two modalities.

At the beginning of my work as a therapist, I practised couples counselling without a coherent theory or methodology. Sadly, the rich theory and practice of couples work developed by Moreno did not catch my attention until recently. In the 1990s however,

someone gave me a video showing Harville Hendrix (1999, 2005, 2005a) demonstrating the Imago couple therapy he had developed. I was impressed by two things, firstly the simple dialogue process that led quickly to deep work on childhood wounds that are influencing a relationship. Secondly, I was attracted to the elegant unravelling of the relationship knot of projections. Thus began my interest. I began to use Imago style dialogues in couple work. I completed an Imago training day, and eventually the full course. In 2006 I qualified as an Imago Relationship Therapist. I was now confronted with the question of my identity as a therapist. An Imago trainer said to me "Now you can put 'Imago Relationship Therapist' on your card". No, I thought. I am trained in Imago but *I am* a Psychodramatist.

The Imago training helped in my practice and I made significant changes to the couple sessions. After only a few sessions, many couples were able to dialogue at home with little coaching from me. They readily used the structure, their work became intentional and collaborative and they reported shifts in their relationship. Some continued to bring to the sessions the difficulties that they experienced in their dialogues at home.

How is it that steeped in the rich, holistic tradition of psychodrama I was attracted to another approach? One answer is that, in the broad scope of psychodrama training and experience the application of the method to couple work had not fully reached my consciousness. How to use the method in practice to reach encounter was still a mystery. Imago was able to illuminate that for me. Another is that stepping into a structured dialogue has the same dramatic impact as stepping onto a psychodrama stage, but with an added advantage. The couple can use the framework at home without a director. They can step from the struggles of life into a place where they face one another in a familiar crucible, in the privacy of their own home. Like psychodrama, Imago cannot be learnt through the written word. It is also an experiential method, and I came to appreciate it through practice. My partner Kate and I attended a workshop together as part of my training. We use the dialogues in our marriage and find them useful.

Both psychodrama and Imago have global intentions that I respect. There is a phrase in Imago circles, "We will change the world, one relationship at a time". Psychodrama has a broad sweep of possibility. It is more a worldview than a modality. This large vision is summed up in the opening lines of Moreno's major work, *Who Shall Survive*. "A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of humanity"¹ (Moreno, 1953:1).

This article began as a comparison of two methods. But something changed as I reflected on the two familiar spheres of endeavour. I began to see psychodrama anew. I saw what was there under my nose all the time. Moreno had already proclaimed many of the principles inherent in Imago. Couple therapy is central to his work. Richard Fowler (1994) revealed this in his excellent article 'Dr. J.L. Moreno - Marriage Therapist'. Theo Compernelle (1981) had produced a paper² acknowledging Moreno's early work in developing conjoint therapy. I found myself not comparing, but seeing each mode of work through the eyes of the other modality. Each perspective enriches the other. I am integrating what I found challenging, powerful and effective in Imago

and I realise that it enables me to enhance psychodramatic principles and practice. I often use psychodramatic concepts such as warm up, and techniques such as doubling and concretising, to extend the dialogues.

Am I now an eclectic therapist? Am I integrating two methods? In a world full of beliefs, modalities, gurus, traditions and philosophies, is it useful to identify with one approach? Or is it a trap? Reflections about professional identity continue. I revisit these in the conclusion.

Imago: Dialogue and the Relational Paradigm

I will outline briefly what I see as the essence of Imago Relationship Therapy. The intentional dialogue is central³. One partner requests a dialogue, and proposes a topic and time. The partners express themselves in the dialogue. They take turns as sender and receiver. The sender speaks from the heart, without blame, and the receiver suspends judgment. There are three stages in the process. The first is word-for-word mirroring followed by a summary, then a validation step, and finally an empathy step.

In addition to a dialogue process, Imago brings a philosophy and theory of relationship dynamics to the work. The therapeutic relationship is viewed as the core of healing in psychotherapy. In Imago, this same principle operates powerfully in a life partnership. A couple's problematic relationship dynamics are viewed as unconscious attempts to heal old pain and repair inevitable deficits. Their work through Imago dialogues is central in healing these childhood wounds. Imago thus assists the natural healing inherent in the committed, sacred, loving relationship⁴. Hendrix describes how this unconscious dynamic works.

This image of "the person who can make me whole again" I call the Imago. Though we consciously seek only the positive traits, the negative traits of our caretakers are more indelibly imprinted in our Imago picture, because those are the traits which caused the wounds we now seek to heal. Our unconscious need is to have our feelings of aliveness and wholeness restored by someone who reminds us of our caretakers. In other words, we look for someone with the same deficits of care and attention that hurt us in the first place.

Hendrix, 1999:5

Imago therapists view the relationship as the focus of the therapy. This perspective is of more value to them than technique. Imago theory identifies this as a shift to a relationship paradigm. "Rather than there being two individuals having a relationship, the relationship has individuals" (Mason, 2005: 139). "The emphasis of the new paradigm, then, is on the understanding of discrete objects within the context of relationship. Without abandoning any understanding of the self that we gained from more atomistic investigations, we now view the relationship as the central unit of analysis" (ibid:142).

The Locus of Therapy and the Focus of Therapy

Both Imago and psychodrama work with the psyche to bring a person to new consciousness and new ways of being. In this, they have a similar *focus*. Psychodrama is more varied in its *locus*⁵. Group, individual, family and couple are all possible as points of entry into the dramas of the unconscious, whereas Imago specialises in dyadic work. Its locus of therapy is the relationship.

It is interesting to note that Moreno did see a place for the conjoint work, outside of group or individual therapy. In fact he was a pioneer of this idea, seeing it as especially important when there was a co-unconscious. "Forms of treatment are necessary which are able to reach the interpersonal syndromes as deeply, if not more so, than it would a single person. Interpersonal therapy represents a special category; it might well be classified apart from individual and group psychotherapy" (Moreno, 1975:45).

Dialogue and Psychodrama

Looking through the psychodrama lens, I notice much of the dialogue work I do with couples is assisted by my psychodrama experience. I coach specific skills that a couple needs to create a dialogue. But the word skill does not quite capture the essence of the work. The psychodramatic concept of role assists, and so do many psychodrama techniques.

What are the roles a person enacts during a dialogue? That is a useful question! Many of the role dynamics that are difficult in the relationship may also be present in a dialogue. For example, one partner in a couple may despair that nothing will make any difference or be afraid of losing identity. They may comply with the dialogue form, but remain in a conflicted state as they go through the motions in a fragmented, aggressive or coping way. I engage with each of the partners. I coach them to be with one another in a new way, and this often involves doubling, original social atom explorations and role reversal. Here is an example.

Relationship Psychotherapy Example with Annie and Frank

Frank and Annie have heard about Imago from a friend in another part of the country. They have read some self-help books about the process and have come to see me because they have not succeeded in doing this on their own.

In an early dialogue with Annie as sender and Frank as receiver.

Annie *in a critical, pained voice . . .* We are so different. I think you waste the opportunity we have in our dialogues by talking about our plans for the renovations.

Frank *raises his eyebrows, sighs, bored and in a sarcastic tone . . .* You think we are different, and that I waste the opportunity of these dialogues.

Annie *annoyed . . .* See, you don't really listen. You are too critical.

I invite the couple to move to an observer position as I mirror back to them what I saw, emphasising accusatory aspects.

Frank to Frank You are not listening. You are fighting.

Through some role reversals with himself and discussion between the three of us, Frank encourages himself to be an 'absorbed reader'. This is a role he knows well, someone who forgets everything except the unfolding moment. Annie, in turn, makes a connection with herself as her own best friend. She strengthens her commitment to hang in there with herself in a caring and encouraging way. The dialogue continues.

Annie *after a pause, a reflective breath . . .* I am scared you judge my feelings as wrong. I think you wouldn't do this if you could be more in touch with your feelings.

Frank *leaning forward, smiles slightly . . .* Let me see if I have got the plot. If you saw me get in touch with my feelings more you would feel safer to have yours.

Relational Thinking

Imago has sharpened my perception of the interlocking dynamics in a committed, sacred, loving relationship. When the focus is on the client's relationship, individual psychotherapy is better done with the partner present. I go a step further. If the person is in a committed, sacred, loving relationship, healing of the damaged psyche is more effective if the work is done in couple therapy. The natural healing potential of the relationship dynamics can foster that process, whereas individual psychotherapy can frustrate it. I see the relationship as an entity, with its own life, identity and co-unconscious. Where possible, I will always engage both partners.

Relationship Psychotherapy with Mary and John

A new client, Mary, phones me to make an appointment. What follows is an abbreviated summary.

Mary I would like to make a time to see you. I have been depressed and medication is not helping much. I am losing my self-esteem. My husband thinks I should change my job, but I know that is not going to help. I like my job, but I do get stressed. He just puts more pressure on me. Then I feel distant from him and that makes things worse.

Walter Would you be willing to do couple therapy?

Mary I would like that but he won't come. I have asked him. I told him my biggest problem is his blasting me with his opinions all the time.

Walter The relationship is difficult, and this is central to what you are bringing to the therapy. . .

Mary Yes

Walter I think it would be a good idea if I work with you both. How about I give John a call?

John is willing to do relationship therapy. I imagine my invitation is more appealing than the invitations made by his wife. When I speak to each of them on the phone, I am thinking of the relationship as the client. I have the sense of being a director on a psychodrama stage with the wife and husband already present. She has brought the relationship to therapy. The relationship has provoked her to do so.

My knowledge that they are married gives me the legitimacy to treat John and Mary as one entity. Somewhere along the line, they have created a covenant⁶ at the heart of their union. I would not have taken this path had the 'other' been a friend, family member or co-worker. As with psychodrama, Imago sees the loving, primary relationship entity as qualitatively different from other relationships. The underlying idea that there is a co-created entity with its own life is well put by Moreno.

A co-conscious or a co-unconscious state can not be the property of one individual only. It is always a common property and cannot be reproduced but by a combined effort. If a re-enactment of such co-conscious or co-unconscious state is desired or necessary, that re-enactment has to take place with the help of all partners. . . . However great a genius of perception one partner of the ensemble might have, he or she can not produce that episode alone because they have in common their co-conscious and co-unconscious states which are the matrix from which they drew their inspiration and knowledge.

Moreno, 1977:VII

Moreno calls the conjoint work interpersonal therapy, and for some cases he sees it as essential. He may involve more people than the couple, so he does not embrace the relational paradigm in the way that Imago does. However, Moreno is clear that there are potent dynamics that require conjoint work. Using auxiliaries in re-enactment when the partner is not present is not always enough. The following example, from individual therapy with a couple, illustrates how the other party is needed for the full dynamics to be explored. Let us go to a moment in the third session in the relationship therapy with Mary and John.

Mary and John: Session 3

The couple has learned to take turns, and take time to make sense of one another before responding. John listened carefully to Mary who has spoken in depth, and without blame or criticism of John. She has related current feelings to experiences in childhood. As a young girl, she feared rejection by her father if she brought home a poor report from school.

John has made a good summary. I invite him, as the listener, to step into Mary's shoes and let her know what sense he is making of what she has expressed.

John I can see how when you were a girl you would be afraid of your father. He

had a strong will and you were under a lot of pressure to succeed.
Mary *nods*
John And you hid your fear and felt lonely.
Mary Yes ... *tears begin to flow* ...
John I imagine you are pleased that I don't expect you to achieve at work, and that I can see you are stressed.
Mary No!

Mary goes on to explain, with some distress, that she feels both scared and lonely in the relationship. This, she makes clear, is not because she is expected to achieve, but because John has all sorts of plans he thinks will do her good. They sound reasonable, but she does not want to do them.

John is able to contain his distress so that he can continue to listen to Mary and successfully step into her shoes.

John You feel under pressure in our relationship. You go inside and say nothing, but you feel alone.
Mary Yes.

It is clear from this example that John, though capable, is no 'genius of perception' to quote from Moreno in the passage above. He would not have been able to produce an accurate enactment or presentation of this relationship without Mary correcting his perceptions of her.

Relationship as Protagonist

What then when a psychodrama group is tackling relationship questions? On occasions we work conjointly with couples. I like to think of it as working with the group's 'protagonist relationship'. A video of Moreno (1964) working with a couple in a psychodramatic way, accessible via the internet on YouTube, makes instructive viewing.

Psychodrama Group Example

In a recent group we explored working with relationships. The group did not contain couples as such, but some of the participants knew one another in depth. We focussed on a relationship being an entity with its own life. A relationship was found to be the protagonist for the group in the following way.

A group theme had emerged during the warm up - being yourself in a relationship, without losing yourself or damaging the relationship.

Director Invite another person to explore the relationship dynamics that exist between you. If they accept the invitation, then yours is potentially a protagonist relationship for this group.

Several invitations were made and declined, each attempt revealing more about the depth of the group theme. Two invitations were accepted. A sociogram revealed which of these relationships was of most interest to the group, and a drama involving dialogue and psychodramatic enactment followed.

Encounter

Psychodrama and Imago have common roots in that they embrace the idea of encounter and the I–Thou relationship. The experience of Imago dialogue in my own marriage and with my clients, has led to a deeper interest in the story of encounter and dialogue as presented by Martin Buber (2004) and J.L. Moreno. There is no doubt that the origins of encounter and I–Thou can be found in religious traditions. Both Buber and Moreno were influenced by Hasidic Judaism. As a young man, Moreno articulated and invited people to an encounter. It appears that he published his ideas earlier than Martin Buber⁷. I have explored other branches of the dialogue tradition, notably David Bohm (1996), Marshal Rosenberg’s *Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life* (2003), and Jim Rough’s ‘Dynamic Facilitation’ as described in an excellent manual by Rosa Zubizarreta (2006). These forms have all contributed to my practice in couple psychotherapy and I wish to acknowledge them here.

At their heart, both Moreno’s and Hendrix’s work go beyond technique and are an invitation to a profound experience. The aim of a dialogue is not a specific outcome, nor is it reliant on one method. Here is the section of Moreno’s well known poem that encapsulates the idea of encounter.

*A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face.
And when you are near I will tear your eyes out
and place them instead of mine,
and you will tear my eyes out
and will place them instead of yours,
then I will look at you with your eyes
and you will look at me with mine.⁸*

Moreno 1977:1

Harville Hendrix introduced the validation step into the Imago structure with an eye to facilitating just such an experience. It is often taught as understanding or making sense. The lead-in line usually goes like this “You make sense. And one thing that makes sense is...” The listener is invited to cross a bridge into the world of the other, and to see what they see, and feel what they feel in that world. Note the similarity to Moreno in Hendrix’s idea.

Buber clarified for me that a “Thou” relationship with others required honoring their

“otherness” as an “I” distinct from me and any concepts I might have of them. This required a willingness to look at the world of another through his or her eyes.

Hendrix, 2005a:27

Psychodramatic practice can facilitate the validation. While enacting the role of the other in a psychodrama, judgment is suspended. Validation is different to role reversal though, because it includes a *response* from the other. Psychodramatically, validation is facilitated through role reversal, and there is another step too.

“I will look at you with your eyes. . . .”

Mary and John: Session 4

Mary has just listened to her husband and makes an adequate summary.

Mary You are irritated when I am so busy with work and when I spend the weekend socialising with family and friends. You want more time for us to be together, just the two of us. Last weekend with my parents you felt particularly constrained.

She continues to the validation step.

Mary You make sense. What makes sense is that you want me to give up what is important for me and to do what you want.

John Ah no. Not at all. That is not it.

Walter Mary, I imagine you fear you will lose your freedom. Save that for your turn. Step into his world. Become engrossed in it. Imagine his experience. What it is like to be John in various situations?

With some guidance, Mary uses cushions to create a scene with her parents and herself. She steps into that scene as John.

Mary *as John, takes some time, and addresses ‘Mary’* . . . I lose the connection I have with you. I can’t find you in the busy week and family flurry. I yearn for our intimacy.

Mary *back in her own chair and as herself to John* . . . You are lonely even in our times together. You want to be close, connected, and you are stuck. You don’t know how to break through the social clutter.

John Yes. Yes, that is it exactly.

Mary *as they look at one another* . . . That makes sense. I miss our connection too. I imagine you feel sad.

Mary and John have created a moment of encounter.

End of the Affair?

I recall a period in my life of professional promiscuity. It lasted about a year. I went to TA, Gestalt, NLP and other training workshops. My supervisor suggested that one would be right for me and I would know it. He was right. I made conscious decisions to complete psychodrama training at my first workshop in Hanmer Springs in 1980. I fully embraced the psychodrama method. It appealed. I was in love. I certainly have a relationship with psychodrama in the broadest sense. As a practice, a theory, and as a movement in the world it is the one I am most connected to. But am I married to it?

Imago construes marital affairs as exits from the relationship. Partners co-create ways of avoiding the painful wounds that intimacy reveals. If the underlying dynamics of the affair can be worked through, it will deeply enrich the marriage. Both partners will change. If I am married to psychodrama I have not had an affair at all! I have not exited from my relationship. In writing this article, I have experienced a dialogue between the psychodramatist and the Imago Therapist within me. Psychodrama is enriched with my knowledge of the power of the relationship, the *Imago Match*, and the thoughtful, practical steps to create dialogue. Imago sessions are easier to conduct within the frame of my psychodramatic knowledge of warm up, role training, doubling and other forms of enactment.

Conclusion

My new perspective does not see the two modes, Psychodrama Interpersonal Therapy and Imago Relationship Therapy as symmetrical. I tend to integrate Imago learning into psychodrama rather than the other way around. This is not to diminish Imago. It is a fully fledged theory of psychodynamics, and includes perspectives on human development and on the structures of personality.

The reason for my sense of asymmetry may be due to my having fallen in love so long ago, and having the psychodrama method with me most of my life. I see a picture. The curtains open on a stage. Anything is possible. On the stage the two modalities and their founders come alive. We can explore the details of their practice, their histories and futures together on the stage. Right now I would like to explore how we can develop relationship therapy beyond what we know today. I think we can use the psychodrama process to expand and to enrich the method, to explore possibilities and to consciously learn and evolve.

END NOTES

1. I have made a small change to the original to make it gender inclusive.
2. Theo Compernelle (1981) wrote *J.L. Moreno: An Unrecognised Pioneer of Family Therapy* and the abstract is worth noting. "J.L. Moreno's fundamental and pioneering contributions to the development of

group therapy, encounter, transactional analysis, and especially Psychodrama are well known. However, most family therapists seem unacquainted with the fact that from his earliest writings in 1923 J.L. Moreno developed an interactional view of psychotherapy that in 1973 already resulted in formulations of a true systems orientation and very concrete ideas about marital therapy, family therapy, and network therapy. He probably is the first (1937!) therapist that actually involved a husband's lover in conjoint marital therapy. His general theoretical formulations about the pathology of interpersonal relations as well as his practical suggestions for the therapy of the interpersonal relations seem to be insufficiently known to workers and researchers in the field of family therapy" (p 331).

3. See an engaging description online by Dawn J. Liphthrott, 2009.
4. I say committed, sacred, loving relationship because the term marriage is inaccurate and I can find no other suitable word. Relationship therapy applies to de facto marriages and to people who refuse marriage, so as to exclude the state and/or the church from their union. Gay people are often excluded by the state and the church from being able to marry. Later in this essay, I may use the term relationship. I trust the full meaning is evident from the context.
5. Locus of therapy is a term used by Moreno to refer to what has also been called the unit of analysis (Luquet, 2005:2). Here is a passage from *Psychodrama Third Volume*. "The change in locus of therapy ... means literally a revolution in what was always considered appropriate medical practice. Husband and wife, mother and child, are treated as a combine, often facing one another and not separate (because separate from one another they may not have any tangible mental ailment)" (Moreno & Moreno, 1975:316).
6. Helen LaKelly Hunt (2005) has written a useful essay discussing the distinction between a contract and a covenant. Marriage includes a covenant. She highlights the difference in this way "covenants are not broken; they are violated . . . The indissolubility of two people in a covenantal relationship suggests a permanence of connection that endures through struggle. It suggests that no matter how either person in the covenant behaves, their undying bond is 'for better or worse, till death do us part'" (p48).
7. Zerka Moreno (2007:6) published an item 'Moreno's Influence on Martin Buber' in the *Psychodrama Network News*. She highlighted the importance of Psychodrama as a means of creating encounter. The opening paragraph follows. "Dr. Robert Waldl from Vienna, who presented at both the New York and Miami conferences, has discovered that J.L. Moreno influenced Martin Buber in his ideas of The Encounter. Moreno started his publications from 1914 onwards under the title series *Einladung zu einer Begegnung*, or *Invitations to an Encounter*, predating Buber's *Ich und Du*, or *I and Thou* by nine years. Dr. Waldl is planning to publish his PhD thesis in German and we hope for an English translation in the not too distant future. The significance of this discovery cannot be overestimated considering Buber's influence on philosophy, theology and psychology. While it is true that Buber broadened the idea of The Encounter, he did not create instruments for it to occur. Moreno literally invited such meetings and furthermore, produced the various instruments we now use to facilitate the human encounter, sociometry, group psychotherapy, psychodrama, sociodrama".
8. Translated from *Einladung zu einer Begegnung* by J.L. Moreno.

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