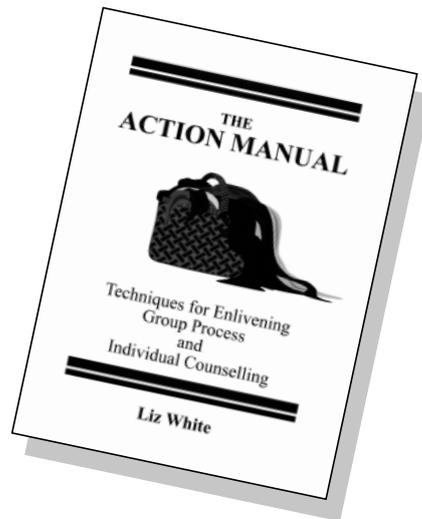


The Action Manual: Techniques for Enlivening Group Process and Individual Counselling

by Liz White

(2002) YWCA Life Skills Publications Department,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

[http://www.ywcatator.org/lifeskills/publications/
actionmanual.htm](http://www.ywcatator.org/lifeskills/publications/actionmanual.htm)



Reviewed by John Farnsworth

The *Action Manual* deserves a very warm welcome from the psychodrama community. It is a book that fills a gap in psychodrama writing and provides an invaluable resource for trainees and practitioners alike.

Liz White has produced a compendium of exercises, techniques, games and action methods that covers the gamut of psychodrama work from warm-up to closure. She describes the *Manual* as a cookbook, and it is a good metaphor. In a nutshell, this is a set of reliable, imaginative recipes that will enable directors and group workers to move into action confidently and effectively. Like any recipe, the ingredients can be modified, substituted, enlarged or reduced according to taste and circumstances. Indeed, the whole book is an invitation to do so.

As with any good cookbook, I quickly found I didn't just want to read the text. Instead, I wanted to try out the recipes on my fellows and see what came of them. And that is one of the chief virtues of this *Manual*: it is endlessly stimulating. For example, I discovered every time I passed it on to my colleagues for what I thought was a quick inspection their curiosity was instantly kindled and their appetite whetted. The result was a noticeable reluctance on their part to actually give the book back to me.

The *Manual* is more than just a collection of exercises. It is organized into a cluster of five sections that Liz White calls warm-up, exploring, working through, surplus reality with a final section on integration and closure. Each section contains at least nine exercises, and usually more. Many of

the exercises have variations or additional suggestions, so that the range is even larger than it first seems.

The sections all begin with an introduction that sets the scene and then stands alongside the reader as he or she surveys the exercises ahead. Each exercise also has its own theory box that frames the method and integrates it into the wider thinking and practice of psychodrama.

The *Manual* is not limited to the area of psychodrama. Liz White is a T.E.P. who trained with the sociometrist Ann Hale so the *Exploring* section, for example, has an extensive section on the social atom, the action sociogram and the sociometric cycle. There are also exercises on sociodrama, bibliodrama and conflict resolution, along with many exercises that are readily suited to role training.

Some of the exercises will be familiar because they have long been staples of the method: these include future projection, conversation in pairs, hand on the shoulder, The Magic Shop, the Family Album and others. Yet each is warmly and imaginatively described with an immediacy that constantly refreshed my own understanding of the purpose or likely impact of an exercise. The accompanying theory boxes point to ways an exercise or technique can be integrated into the life of a group so that it facilitates, deepens or focuses group members' experience.

Many other exercises may be less familiar and each reader is likely to pick out their own favourites. For example, Liz White presents quite a number of variations on ways to concretise the social atom: using paper and pencil, using five criteria, looking at the distribution of power, developing the fantasy social atom, and so on. Conflict

resolution ranges across the structured encounter to encounter with fantasy figures in ways that are both engaging and safe. In the *Surplus Reality* section there is 'The Great Escape' (a way of enacting daydreams and visions) and 'Finishing Unfinished Business' with its echoes of Gestalt practice. *Working Through* covers 'Scapegoating: A Sociodrama' and 'The Janus Gate' is a technique named after the two-headed Roman god who faces both the past and the future, and can be used as a whole-day workshop.

The *Integration and Closure* section includes details on how to make and then use masks, while 'Rites of Passage' celebrates developmental phases for different group members. 'The Coat of Arms' involves a whole evening spent exploring the values that individuals hold dear as they fill out the four quadrants of their own personal coat of arms.

I had never heard of 'The Stone Games' devised by Joseph Schaeffer. This has two versions: one asks each person in a group to place 100 stones silently in a circle in sequence with others as a luminous way of evoking feelings, self-awareness and a sense of co-creation. The other, a vocal version, promotes the articulation of difference or conflict through the placement of stones next to disputants.

The book begins with a full and engaging introduction that sets out the foundations of action methods and introduces Moreno to readers new to his work. It outlines the Hollander Curve, which charts the ebb and flow of psychodramatic action, and emphasises the importance of the principles of creativity for action methods and psychodrama. There is also a set of tips that are worthwhile reminders for psychodrama veterans and also invaluable for newcomers.

These include: 'psychodrama is not fragile', 'take Kleenex', 'expect more impact than you expect', 'the protagonist is always right' and 'don't promise anything!'

I have one main reservation about the book, and that is about Liz White's invitation to counsellors and general group workers to make full use of these methods. The techniques she describes are often very powerful and, without some training in psychodrama, unwary readers may plunge straight from text to action without an appreciation of the method's complexity. In the metaphor of the cookbook, this is likely to be a recipe for disaster.

It is also worth bearing in mind that the book is not designed as a standard training manual. Although it has an exercise on doubling, for example, it doesn't lay out all the terminology and techniques of psychodrama or elaborate on different types of auxiliary work. It is not that kind of book.

That aside, this really is an excellent book for experienced practitioners and particularly

for psychodrama trainees. This is not just because of the panorama of methods the book presents, but also for its helpful bibliography, the useful glossary of terms it provides, and the attractive, detailed diagram of the sociometric cycle. It is excellent, too, for its consistent integration of ideas, theory and method and its lively presentation of warm-up.

The *Manual* also comes in a thoughtfully designed layout: its A4 format and wide-spaced text allows relevant pages to be easily photocopied and incorporated into a session without having to wave a large book around.

Above all, *The Action Manual* is a wonderful and consistently refreshing warm-up to action. From the first page to the last, it constantly asks to be put into action – and what better invitation could that be for a psychodramatist? I warmly recommend it both for individuals and, in particular, for training libraries. It is a welcome, inviting and stimulating resource.