

# J.L. Meets the Warrior Princess: Exploring Psychodrama and Feminism

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Since I first encountered feminism and psychodrama, both have been enormously influential in my life. In this article, I explore some of their intersections in the work I do at The Next Step Centre for Women, part of Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology.

The Centre was set up thirty years ago in the early, heady days of feminism to cater for the growing demand by women for a facility geared for their needs. That it is still functioning and still needed today, is testament to both the successes and failures of feminism. At the Centre I run various groups that fall under the heading, somewhat uneasily within a tertiary institution, of personal development. Most typically, a woman who comes to one of these groups is either contemplating or starting on a new phase in her life. This may have been precipitated by the premature end of a domestic partnership that has cast her into unknown, and perhaps unwelcome, territory. It may be because her children are now off to school, or their own adult lives. Some women have been encouraged to attend by their counsellor, and some have been sent by case managers eager to nudge them off a benefit. Others are recovering from an anxiety disorder or depression. For most, it is the first group of this type they have attended.

## **New Eyes**

"The real voyage of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes". Marcel Proust (as cited in Genn, 2005)

Women come to these groups, whether eagerly or reluctantly, wishing that things were different. What is often missing is a vision of *how* to live a more satisfying life. They know they want change but cannot see what that change might look like. Nor do they have a belief in their ability to create the changes needed. To take, or envisage taking, steps towards a different future, in order to transform an unsatisfactory present, requires the courage to dream again.

Stephanie Dowrick (1997:13), naming courage as one of six virtues, says it "can open us to life, and set us free". But courage can be elusive, especially where dreams of transformation are concerned. To believe that change is possible, that you are not stuck and helpless, and that there are more possibilities in your life than those currently enacted, calls for the emergence of new eyes. Through the application of psychodrama, informed by feminism, appropriate roles can emerge or be developed to create such eyes, making the courage to dream again possible. The role cluster of the *Courageous Dreamer* includes the *Creative Visionary*, *Adventurous Imaginer*, *Bold Explorer* and *Determined Self-Believer*.

## **Up From Under:**

### **The Warrior Princess Emerges**

The women's movement of the early seventies, the second wave of feminism, sprang from a deep desire for a fairer and more just society. In line with Moreno's declaration that "a truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less of an objective than the whole of mankind" (1993:3), feminists set out to enlarge people's possibilities: "For this is the dream - that all human beings can be more than present circumstances allow" (Rowbotham, 1983:354).

Suddenly there arose a whole new analysis to describe the experience of "being a woman". Feminists worked to name, understand and reform women's oppression. They sought radical understandings, and therefore needed radically new ways of finding knowledge. Collaborative problem-solving was an integral premise. Feminists no longer wanted to be dictated to by experts, particularly if those experts were men. They suggested that women's confidence in their own knowing had been undermined by "giving advice to women ... one of the most constant industries in Western civilisation" (Kolbenschlag, 1988:13). As an antidote, feminists formed consciousness-raising groups where women could discuss their experiences, find support and solutions, and agitate for political change. Sisterhood was born!

Feminists certainly needed courage for these ground-breaking endeavours. Although sometimes myopic and misguided, feminists had the courage to dream. They believed men and women could find new ways of behaving so that power would be distributed more equitably, resources spread more fairly and all would have the chance of realising their dreams. "We have made, amidst error, a movement seeking bread and roses" pronounced Sheila Rowbotham (1983:354), and in doing so, effected a revolution in how society understood power and organised its gender relations.

## **But Things Are Different Now - Aren't They?**

We live now, supposedly, in a post-feminist world where many of the structural aspects of gender discrimination have been removed. There is formal equality for women under the law and women are more readily included in positions of political power. More widespread provisions have been made for child-care and family leave, and some action has been taken to counter domestic violence and sexual harassment towards women.

However, even a cursory glance at the lives of ordinary men and woman shows we do not yet enjoy an equal world. The 1980 United Nations report stating, "Women constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property" (cited in *Women and Work*, 2005) is still relevant today. Feminist and philosopher Harriet Baber, who has a particular interest in the economic status of women, maintains that "sex roles, and conventional expectations about women's behaviour, aptitude and goals, restrict women's options"(nd:6). Gender roles, developed in formative relationships, continue to inform conscious and unconscious experiences of being female or male, and can limit women's choices.

## **How Gender Roles Develop**

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman". Simone de Beauvoir (1953)

Morenian role theory teaches that roles do not develop in isolation but within a context of role relationships. Gender roles become established early in life through interactions within the original social and cultural atom. We categorise people, including babies, according to sex (Bem, 1993), and then hold different expectations for them based on our gender beliefs. Studies of perception and gender (Condry & Condry, 1976; Culp, Hook & Housley, 1983) show that a baby of either sex will be experienced and related to differently depending on whether it is *believed* to

be a girl or a boy. As the child grows, gender socialisation continues - so, for example, infant girls are more likely to be discouraged from large motor activity than boys (Fagot, 1978).

Moreno explains: "The function of the role is to enter the unconscious from the social world and bring shape and order into it .... We consider roles and the relationships between roles as the most significant development within any specific culture" (1977:v-vi). In Western culture stereotypical role expectations of gender, transmitted through the family and reinforced by society, can mitigate against women being active on their own behalf. This is because women's historical gender socialisation has disposed them to roles associated with passivity rather than action, with being "decided for" rather than being the decider.

Beauvoir (1953:273-274), discussing the socialisation of the female child, notes: "If, well before puberty, sometimes even from early infancy, she seems to us to be already sexually determined this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, maternity; it is because the influences of others upon the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from the earliest years".

### **"Formula Females"**

Madonna Kolbenschlag (1988), one of many feminist writers who expanded on this theme, describes how women and girls have been predominantly socialised to live for others, at the expense of their own needs. This results in what she calls a "formula female", who is self-effacing, self-forgetting and dedicated to other people or causes. Consequentially, and crucially, she enables the dreams of others rather than following her own.

Notwithstanding the tremendous revision in gender socialisation that has taken place over the last 30 years, the enduring remnants of this legacy explain why accessing the courage to dream again can still be problematic for women.

Based on traditional gender expectations, role clusters such as *Mummy's/Daddy's Good Little Girl*, *Little Princess*, *Sugar 'n Spice* and *Cinderella* tend to be overdeveloped, and hinder women's attempts to act assertively and independently.

Happily, feminists were not the only ones concerned with such issues. Dr J. L. Moreno had a vision of men and women accessing a wide range of role behaviour, thereby increasing their options to live spontaneously, free from rigid cultural restrictions. It was a fundamental tenet of the system he created for exploring and expanding people's lives and changing society as a whole - psychodrama.

### **Moreno & Feminism**

Jacob Moreno may well have been one of the pioneers of women's consciousness-raising groups! As a young medical student working in Vienna in 1913, he became aware of the discriminatory practices prostitutes were subjected to (Fox, 1987:xiv). Becoming involved in their plight, he helped the prostitutes with their legal and material needs, and in a forerunner to what would become commonplace over half a century later, set up small groups where they could "air their concerns and provide help and support for each other" (Sternberg, 2000:9). This led to the women organising themselves and, foreshadowing a feminist agenda, taking political action on their own behalf.

Yet Moreno was also a man of his time. He developed psychodramatic theory between 1920 and the late 1960s, finishing writing just as the second wave of feminism became influential in his adopted home, the USA. Moreno's minimal exposure to feminist discourse is evident within his texts, where, for example, he uses language based on gender stereotyping. Despite immense insight and acuity, he did not escape enculturation in the gender mores of his era. But, Moreno was also a visionary. He realised that the roles people enact are "created by past experiences and the cultural patterns of the society in which the individual lives" (1961:519). Believing these roles to be restrictive,

he imagined men and women accessing an increased range of role behaviour, which would change society as a whole.

### **Gender Roles Expanded**

Feminists agree, believing both sexes have been limited by society's gender-role stereotyping. Furthermore, they note that roles assigned as properly feminine are given lesser value than those associated with masculinity. Thus, unpaid child-rearing by mothers has less status than almost any paid work, teaching pre-schoolers is not nearly as highly valued as teaching adults, and nursing has always been significantly less remunerated than the comparative occupation of policing. Devaluing what is perceived as feminine disadvantages both sexes. It not only denigrates women's contribution and influence, but also makes men reluctant to broaden *their* role repertoire to include conventionally feminine, and therefore lower status, roles. Consequently, one of the aims of feminism is for individuals to free themselves from the restrictions of rigid sex-role prescriptions (Worell and Remer, 1992:12).

Psychodrama offers just this possibility, making no distinctions for role uptake based on gender. With very few exceptions (the somatic, but not the psychodramatic, role of the breast-feeder comes to mind), any role is available to men or women. Dr Moreno believed that the wider the role repertoire, the healthier the individual: "The individual craves to embody far more roles than those he is allowed to act out in life" (1961:519). Moreno, despite the age he lived in, created a method that promotes maximum role flexibility for both men and women. Thus feminism and psychodrama have a fundamental philosophical compatibility - but they also have their differences.

### **Difference Explored**

One such difference in the outlook of psychodrama and feminism can be illustrated by examining their contrasting beliefs regarding the causal factors of the world's problems, and how they view the specific psychodrama technique of role-reversal.

Psychodrama tells us that a lack of progressive functioning in the world is brought about by an absence of spontaneity, emphasising the thwarting or derailing of a *process*. Therefore the solution is also a process. An increase in spontaneity is needed, which can be facilitated through psychodramatic enactment. By increasing the spontaneity of the producer and therefore the protagonist, an enabling solution can be found that fits this protagonist, in these circumstances, at this time. The protagonist is assisted to become a *Creative Genius* and a *Spontaneous Actor*, and so develop adequate functioning to meet life's challenges.

### **Illustration One <sup>1</sup>**

It is early days in the New Outlook for Women course (which runs for 4 hours daily, 3 days a week for 8 weeks). To value and build on the existing progressive role functioning of each of the 15 women, I ask them to think of a strength they possess which will assist them as they move into the future. Cherie has been at home with kids for the last ten years. She looks awkward and says that she can't think of anything. To date Cherie has been a willing, if somewhat unconfident, group member who is competently raising two children single-handedly. She couldn't be doing this without enacting many progressive roles. Not uncommonly for a woman in her circumstance, Cherie is unable to recognise these strengths, noticing instead only the gaps in her functioning. I realise that she is enacting the over-developed role of the *Self-Conscious Self-Depreciator*. Believing that Cherie can access a different role with an increase in spontaneity, I ask her to name a close friend, someone who knows her well and wants the best for her. She names Julie, choosing an auxiliary to act in Julie's role. After warming-up Cherie to the role of her valued friend, and therefore increasing her capacity for spontaneity, I direct Cherie to ask Julie about her strengths. In the role reversal, as Julie, she immediately spouts off that Cherie is sensitive, enthusiastic, has good organisational abilities and is a loyal friend. Back in her own role, Cherie receives this with openness and gratification, and is able to

confidently complete the rest of the task. She later quizzically comments, "It's all inside us the whole time, isn't it, and you just somehow bring it out".

Working with Cherie, I have trust in the process. Cherie's increased spontaneity enables something new and adequate to emerge. She is able to access her own knowing and develop her own answers. As the course continues, Cherie increasingly speaks out, adding her own wisdom and experience to group discussions. Her assurance visibly grows as these contributions are taken seriously. The embryonic roles of *Confident Self-Knower* and *Loving Self-Appreciator* are developing.

### **Possibility vs Process**

In contrast to the psychodramatist's emphasis on *process*, feminists tend to see the *fact* of women's oppression as the central problem of the world. They therefore focus on content and are more readily prescriptive about specific remedies needed to end this oppression. For example, Worell and Remer, feminist therapy theorists, express concern about the possible misuse of role reversal (1992:141). They propose that role reversal can make the expression of anger by a woman more difficult, as well as preventing a woman from discovering her own needs and wants by keeping her focused on the needs of others. They thus advise that it be used "judiciously" with women.

Max Clayton (1993:69-70) alludes to the dangers in adopting set procedures for specific groups of people within psychodrama. "The practitioner who focuses on developing special approaches ... may develop an intellectualisation process leading to a wooden and mechanical application of certain techniques with one class of person .... and may therefore miss experiencing each person they work with as a unique creative being".

While it certainly behoves psychodramatists to be aware that role reversal may not be indicated with some women because of their socialisation

to repress anger and to value others' needs over their own, it is also important that a distinction is made between holding this thought as a possibility, and applying it as a prescription. The latter contains remnants of didacticism whereby women were cast in the role of victim solely because of their sex. This was a characteristic of some early feminist theory that many women have since rejected as a partial and imperfect description of their reality.

None of us, psychodramatists included, practise in a cultural vacuum. Therefore, we all need to be alert to embedded stereotypes and blind spots. To this end, an understanding of feminist thinking on gender-stereotyping is important. But psychodrama does not favour "one-size-fits-all" answers that hold for individuals, regardless of circumstances. Moreno saw the cause of the world's problems as a preponderance of conserves. Adopting prescriptive procedures within psychodrama for responding to women would only compound this.

### **Role Reversal and Systems Theory**

Further differences between psychodramatic and feminist perspectives become evident when exploring role-reversal as part of a systems approach. Worell and Remer (1992:141) view role-reversal primarily as a means of promoting empathy, something potentially over-developed in women through their gender socialisation. This makes their concern about its overuse understandable. However, within psychodrama, role-reversal holds many more possibilities. Viewing role-reversal as part of a systems perspective, which feminists are familiar with through their belief that women's oppression is a consequence of the patriarchal system, could facilitate an understanding of its wider potential.

The psychodrama director, acting as a systems analyst, is aware that whatever the protagonist sets out on the stage represents aspects of their inner, as well as their outer world. Therefore the protagonist does not have to be functioning in their own role to experience role development.

Roles enacted in the auxiliary position have just as much potential for transformation, since role change in any part of the system influences the system as a whole.

### **Illustration Two**

In week 3 of another New Outlook course, I ask group members to place themselves on a continuum according to how much encouragement they'd received in their schooling. Toni is distressed. She tearfully relates that only the boys in her family got support. She wonders how her life might have been different if she had received encouragement. I have noticed that Toni is hard on herself, the *Self-Critical Judge*, but supportive of other group members. Although a creative forward-thinker, she has trouble following through on ideas. Now, softly, she talks of a vision she has for her future, but is scared to enact it. I ask about her vision, and she hesitantly says it involves creativity. I direct her to set out Creativity, and decisively and harmoniously she sculpts it, using people, coloured fabrics and objects. She then sets out Peace, Love and her Organic Garden, other aspects of her vision. I direct Toni to be "the spirit" of each of these elements. Toni expresses herself fully as a *Nurturing Encourager* from these roles, "I am always here for you", "You can reach me anytime through the earth", "You are ready to follow your plan and we are with you". She drinks in the encouragement, *Parched Flower in the Rain*, in her own role. Toni continues to develop the role of the *Gentle Self-Encourager* during the rest of the course, as she begins to bring the vision of her future to life.

### **The Developing Self Encourager**

Although Toni had many ideas about future possibilities, she was constrained from turning these ideas into reality. Toni was unable to be a *Self-Encourager* because the lack of support in her childhood meant this role was under-developed. In a therapy group, original social atom repair work may have been appropriate at this point. This option falls beyond the parameters and the contract of the New Outlook course. However, Toni had set out a progressive role system in the

concretisation of her vision. Using role-reversal, which enabled her to enact these roles, Toni had an experience both of giving encouragement to herself and of receiving encouragement. The role of *Nurturing Encourager* first emerged not in her own role, but when she was role-reversed into more progressive aspects of the system. Subsequently, Toni is able to expand the role of *Self-Encourager* into her own daily life.

### **Which System?**

Systems operate at all levels of existence from the cellular to the cosmic. Holmes (1992:26) states "that it is more sensible not to give priority to any particular system in our attempts to understand people". This is inherently easy in psychodrama as it spans cosmic, social, interpersonal and intrapsychic systems. At any time the producer, in consultation with the protagonist, has a wide range of systems to explore.

Feminism, conversely, has mainly focused on the socio-political system of patriarchy as the crucible of change for women. The relationship between feminism and the human potential movement has often been uneasy. This is partly because biological and intrapsychic systems have been misused in the past to justify women's subjugation, and partly because of the fear that individual women could be "helped" into becoming even more compliant with fundamentally oppressive systems. This means feminists have tended to favour political or social activism as a vehicle for women's emancipation, believing a changed society would transform women's lives. Feminism and psychodrama both aim to transform society, but each tends to favour different systems and methodologies to bring this change about.

### **And So To Bed ...**

Some women, in part because of their socialisation into restrictive gender roles, have difficulty imagining and moving into a progressive future. As an antidote to this, both feminism and psychodrama offer new ways of being, so that women can transform inadequate systems and behaviour to those of adequacy.

To this end, Jacob Moreno dreamt of a creative world filled with spontaneous people, enabled through psychodrama to live with maximum involvement and satisfaction. Feminists, likewise, dream of an equal society where suitability, not gender, is the determinant of role uptake. Despite their differences, a marriage of psychodrama with feminism is both possible and desirable. It can result in a powerful force assisting both men and women to live more expansively. Separately, but even more potently together, psychodrama and feminism have the capacity to enlarge all our lives. •

#### FOOTNOTE

1. For all illustrations, names and identifying details of participants have been changed.

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