

Exploring the Therapeutic Potential of Skilled Auxiliary Work

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"Psychodrama is a therapeutic dramatic process employed to help the individual. A group member becomes the protagonist in his/her own drama. Auxiliary egos are chosen from amongst the group members to play the parts of significant others. This way the protagonist can re-examine roles he or she plays in a personal network. Where someone is rigidly bound to a life script that is obsolete and suffocating, a new spontaneity may be found. Other participants, deeply involved, benefit therapeutically by virtue of the mechanisms of resonance and identification." (Wills, 1991, p. 117)

Taking up the role of auxiliary could be seen as an act of ultimate human generosity, whereby one individual volunteers to inhabit the world of another without hesitation, bias, or judgement in order to help the other experience his or her world as fully and as evocatively as possible.

In a recent metaphorically rich psychodrama, the protagonist asked a group member to take up the role of *Gunk* to represent her tendency to self-efface and minimize herself in certain situations. The auxiliary readily took up the role and inhabited it with flourish. She later thanked the protagonist for choosing her to take up that role, "I am familiar with Gunk", she said, "I felt like I could hide there at the bottom of a drain

as long as I wanted to and nobody will bother me".

In the process of professional psychodrama training, it seems crucial to understand 'what does such role taking entail' and 'who benefits from it'. In this paper, I use two lenses, that of extant literature and my own experience, to discuss and illustrate these and related questions: What does 'taking up a role' mean? What are the functions of auxiliaries? To what extent does the auxiliary work entail 'skilled' acts? For whom is or can the auxiliary work be therapeutic - for the protagonist, for the person taking the auxiliary role, for the whole group, all of the above? Do the answers for the above questions hold for a psychodrama situation only or for social interactions in life generally, or both?

Role Taking, Role Playing and Role Creating

"Every role is a fusion of private and collective elements; it is composed of two parts - its collective denominators and its individual differentials." (Moreno, 1953, p.75)

In his book, 'Who shall survive?' Moreno (1953) deals with three notions pertaining to roles a number of times. He elaborates on significant

distinctions between role taking and role playing. The essence of his argument is tied to the notions of Spontaneity-Creativity-Cultural (Social) Conserves (p.46). According to Moreno, *role taking*, as postulated by George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley among others, refers to "...taking of a finished, fully established role which does not permit the individual any variation, any degree of freedom" (p.75). On the other hand, *role playing*, "... permits the individual some degree of freedom - and role creating - [which] permits the individual a high degree of freedom" (p.75). "In contrast with role playing, role taking is an attitude already frozen in the behaviour of the person. Role playing is an act, a spontaneous playing; role taking a finished product, a role conserve" (p.76).

At times he concedes that "...role taking and role playing have a common origin.... That role playing and role taking are two phases of the same process" (p.78). And again, "*In situ* they cannot be separated" (p.79). The way he sees this relationship becomes evident when he states that, "Every roletaking must have been, in *statu nascendi*, a form of roleplaying. The more the role became a conserve, the less spontaneity was necessary to release it.... Roleplaying probably renders its greatest service not only in the improvisation of new roles, but in the revitalizing of role conserves. Taking the role of the other is a dead end. *The turning point is how to vitalize and change the role, how to become a 'rolechanger' and 'roleplayer'.*" (p.691, emphasis mine).

To my mind, it is this last sentence that is of most relevance in understanding the therapeutic potential of auxiliary work. *The auxiliary 'taking up the role' as in role playing, bringing his or her spontaneity and creativity to the role, can indeed be an instrument, a vehicle, of therapeutic change.*

Functions and 'Skillfulness' of Auxiliaries

Moreno posited "...auxiliary egos or participant actors to have a double significance. They are extensions of the director, exploratory and

guiding, but they are also extensions of the subject, portraying the actual or imagined personae of their life drama. The functions of the auxiliary ego are threefold: the function of the actor, portraying roles required by the subject's world; the function of the counsellor, guiding the subject; and the role of the social investigator" (Moreno, 1953, p. 83).

One of the main purposes of the auxiliary is to help the protagonist see his or her experience/ actions more insightfully and clearly. Brodie's advice is, "Experience how it is to be inside the role you are taking.... Get inside the role and let yourself go" (1992, p. 45). The auxiliary has to observe closely and listen carefully, be willing to learn and be open to thoughts, feelings and actions of the other. Obviously, if the auxiliary is to help portray the protagonist's world as Moreno intended, then the accurate representation of the role becomes crucial. Inaccurate portrayal can diminish the warm-up, not be accepted by the protagonist or accepted only superficially thus undermining the impact of the enactment for real change, or even skew the drama away from the real concerns of the protagonist (Clayton, 1992). Or as Zerka Moreno put it, "In the course of representing this 'other', the task is to approximate the perception held by the protagonist and give it flesh, for without this the protagonist 'falls out of his role and situation' and fails to become involved" (1978, p. 164).

And yet, Moreno's emphasis is on the freedom to act with spontaneity and creativity. The therapeutic value of playing a role lies in vitalizing the role, changing the role, he tells us. The auxiliary can illuminate the invisible, say the unsaid, amplify the implied. Such elaborations of a role, however, will have to be done in light of the keen observation and careful listening that the auxiliary is called upon to engage in. Role creating involves a risk that the auxiliary needs to take, but with caution and with respect for the possibility of its non-resonance with the protagonist.

While participating in a psychodrama, the auxiliary has to stay in role under all circumstances. That can be a taxing demand particularly if he or she is uncomfortable in the role due to his or her own issues, or feels compelled to respond if some important aspect of the protagonist's action is left unattended by the director. However, the discipline of staying in role is necessary if the auxiliary is to help the protagonist maintain his or her warm-up to the scene being created.

Further, the auxiliary is called upon to provide something for the protagonist to push against. Blatner (1996) suggests that the auxiliary can "...challenge the protagonist with something responsive and alive, which brings a kind of immediate role demand to the process" (p.17). Role demand "...describes the way certain behaviours ...tend to generate complementary roles..."(p.18). The auxiliary's function, for Brodie as for Blatner, is to create opportunities for the protagonist to experience the role fully.

In my very first group psychodrama experience I happened to witness role demand. An auxiliary provided a resounding challenge to the protagonist, and I thought something had gone drastically wrong. As an audience member new to psychodrama and new to that group, I was quite concerned about what had happened. To my surprise, the protagonist after a slight pause actually took up the challenge, and the whole tone and tenor of the drama changed after that one moment. In the sharing that followed it was amply clear to me that the challenge had indeed been a crucial turning point for the protagonist, even as she conceded smilingly that for a moment she was really beside herself for being put in that situation. The two members had known each other for a long time, so shared a much deeper understanding of each other than was apparent to a novice casual observer like me.

Another skill to which Brodie alerts the auxiliary is to be sensitive to the form and the rhythm of a psychodrama. I can recall many a protagonist

thanking an auxiliary for his or her effective role reversals, mirroring or doubling, "I was quite moved by how you did not hurry through", "you got it just right". The role of the auxiliary is not about pretence or 'hamming it'. One does, in fact, need to develop multifaceted skills to serve as an effective auxiliary.

Auxiliary Roles in Life and Psychodrama

I refer back to Moreno's third function for the auxiliary, that of a social investigator. In social interactions outside psychodrama settings, we all can and do act as auxiliaries for each other. Often as a friend, sibling, family member, teacher, in other words, from within the cultural/social roles one occupies in life, one can encourage another to examine his or her beliefs, actions or feelings pertaining to an incident or a phenomenon. One will have to do so by suspending judgement, criticism or advice, but letting the other know that one is willing "...to be with him in a collaborative manner" (Clayton, 1994, p. 53).

A friend of mine, Claire (a pseudonym), does that for a lot of people, including me. She goes around creating material and emotional contexts for others, by a generous gesture here or a thoughtful question there, but then leaves it to the other to take it up further or not. I think that she is a remarkable auxiliary for me, as evident from a journal entry I made in early 2005:

"She has made the most impact on my life, changing my ways of being in profound and better ways - better in the sense of being more true to myself, more open to my own possibilities, more at ease with who I am with all my strengths and quirks and blunders, and better in terms of my striving to live with *all* of me even as I continue to discover what *all* of me means as I journey through life...What a wonderful gift of friendship - creating possibilities, nurturing souls!"

In such interactions, where the purpose is not

to impose one's wisdom on the other, but to genuinely invite the other to engage in self-exploration and understanding, one is acting as an auxiliary.

Moreno called the energy that works as a base for inter-personal interactions 'tele'. In his words, "...to express the simplest unit of feeling transmitted from one individual towards another we use the term *tele*...'distant'" (1953, p. 314, emphasis in original). Moreno's notion of tele is posited to be "an objective social process functioning with transference as a psychopathological outgrowth and empathy as aesthetic outgrowth" (p.311). Transference and empathy although subsumed under tele are different in nature. Both are conceptualized as one-way feeling processes and both function intra-individually. The former feels into something unreal and the latter into something real. Tele, on the other hand, is construed as a two-way social process with conative and cognitive aspects. It is an abstract concept with no social existence by itself. "It has to be comprehended as a process within a social atom" (p.317). Moreno holds tele "...responsible for the increased rate of interaction between members of a group" (p.312).

Thus, it would follow that irrespective of the setting in which the social interaction occurs, the auxiliary role can be therapeutic for the members, if there is good *tele* between them to re-vitalise the roles through spontaneity and creativity.

Who is the Auxiliary Work Therapeutic For?

"Psychodrama is a group process, not one-to-one therapy in group setting. To honour the expressive capacity in the group helps individuals to honour their own ability to dare to express something from within themselves." (Holmes & Karp, 1991, p. 4)

In a psychodrama, the most therapeutic benefit is accrued by the protagonist as reported in a recent quantitative study conducted in Korea (Kim, 2003). That seems obvious; after all, it is

his or her life experience that is being enacted center stage. The researcher in this study did not differentiate between the audience and the auxiliaries. I agree that it might be a tricky distinction to make, particularly in small groups (The number in the group under study was twelve). All the group members often might be acting as auxiliaries either at the protagonist's request or as actively involved audience members (Blatner, 1996). However, the study gives no information about the group process. The fact that this issue was totally glossed over does not attract confidence in its findings.

In my opinion, participation in someone else's psychodrama, as a group process, has to have therapeutic value for all participants, to the extent that the process was trusted by all concerned. This can hardly be disputed though the degree of therapeutic benefit might vary for different members if one were inclined towards quantification of human experience.

Moreno, and other practitioners of 'group action methods' since, have suggested several mechanisms by which auxiliary work can serve as a therapeutic act to which I turn now. That is, the question of how the skilled work of an auxiliary might serve as a therapeutic act for the protagonist, the auxiliary him/herself or for the whole group is elaborated below with experience based examples.

"...the auxiliary ego is an extension of the director who does not move into the action, of the protagonist who is incomplete without significant other(s), of the absent others who need interpretation, and of the group of co-participants who need to understand the dynamic interaction." (Z. Moreno, 1978, pp. 164-165)

Therapeutic Value of Auxiliary Work for the Protagonist

First and foremost, "[P]sychodrama is a therapeutic dramatic process employed to help the individual" as quoted at the outset. The protagonist through the involved participation

of the auxiliaries and the director is situated in a psychodrama to experience fully 'in that moment' the roles of his or her personal life as well as to potentially create new roles and, if appropriate, experience catharsis of integration.

In view of J. L. Moreno's concept of role playing and role creating discussed earlier, an auxiliary ego's work clearly has therapeutic significance for the protagonist. Zinger (1975), citing Moreno, suggests four components of role behaviour: action, emotion, identity and the situation or social system within which the role is enacted. He elaborates that, "Auxiliaries in their role performance can change one or more of these elements to challenge the protagonist to new perceptions and responses...to exploring and developing new parts of himself" (p.153). When such changes are in keeping with the warm-up of the protagonist, these can enhance the therapeutic benefit of the enactment for the protagonist. Such work of role expansion to be effective will need to be highly skilled, taken up under the guidance of a director, and inhere in spontaneity (not impulsivity) and creativity to mobilize tele - a fine tuned sensitivity to the protagonist. The taking up of a role that a protagonist needs to develop anew or further is facilitated by the auxiliary playing a role with care, depth and integrity.

Techniques such as mirroring, doubling or role reversal that an auxiliary might use in his or her enactment and elaboration of the role are all contributive to and aimed at better understanding and better acceptance by the protagonist of 'what is'. "Where someone is rigidly bound to a life script that is obsolete and suffocating, a new spontaneity may be found" through sensitive auxiliary work as Wills, cited in the beginning of this paper, suggests.

Zerka Moreno (1978) delineated five functions of an auxiliary, including one as that serving as a bridge to reality. While she suggests that this is particularly important for a protagonist who might be out of touch with reality, the function is relevant for any protagonist to some degree.

She writes evocatively about experiencing the privilege of entering into their world, suggesting a sense of reciprocity, a sense of oneness of the human experience between the auxiliary and the protagonist (in her example a psychotic patient allowing her, the therapist, into his/her world). "This leads to becoming a genuine auxiliary ego, eventually able to stretch out one's hand to that person....At that point the final task of the auxiliary ego becomes that of reintegrating the patient into the world of so-called reality"(p.164).

To return to my opening statement or the earlier exemplar of 'Gunk', I think that it is a privilege for the protagonist to have people ready to inhabit his or her world, however tenuous, without argument or question. The auxiliary is expected to play any role assigned to him or her by the protagonist, who occupies 'the center stage'. It could be a significant person in the protagonist's life experience, an aspect of protagonist's intra-psychic world, an object or an abstract presence (e.g., an emotion) of significance in the here and now of the scene being enacted on the psychodrama stage (Blatner, 1996). Such willing participation and abiding support by the auxiliaries in psychodrama might not happen readily in many a life, and might be a therapeutic socio-emotional experience for a protagonist. I personally experience this as a significant positive aspect of my participation in a psychodrama training group.

Therapeutic Value of Auxiliary Work for the Auxiliary Him/Herself

The therapeutic value of taking up a role is potentially high for the auxiliary on a number of counts. Once again I refer back to the opening quote by Wills in this paper, that in part states, "Other participants, deeply involved, benefit therapeutically by virtue of the mechanisms of resonance and identification."

The auxiliary as well as the protagonist in the psychodrama excerpt about 'Gunk' shared that they each benefited from the enactment and could better understand their respective stances

on certain social interactions in which they tried really hard to please others by belittling or negating themselves.

Indeed in almost all the psychodramas that I have been a part of, the sharing after the enactment has generated a number of comments by the auxiliaries about how the enacted roles related to or touched their own experiences - a finding reported frequently in literature as well (e.g., see Bannister, 1991). Recently during an experiential weekend, a psychodrama about incest resulted in the enactment of two subsequent psychodramas in which the auxiliaries from the original drama took up the protagonist roles. In one of the psychodramas, an auxiliary playing the role of the father in the original drama experienced a strong sense of identification with his own role as a neglectful father to one of his children. In the sharing he said that being in that role had made him get in touch with his own failings as a father and his repentance about the harm he unintentionally had caused to his own child.

In the second, an auxiliary playing the role of a daughter in the original drama had received an apology from the father. She later shared that she was deeply moved by that interaction because her own father never had nor would apologize to her for the hurt he had caused to her. She was gratified to receive an apology in her auxiliary role, she said. Participation in that role in someone else's drama, thus, acted as surplus reality for her.

In both cases, the group leader decided to arrange for these auxiliaries to experience these roles more fully by inviting them to be protagonists for just that one relevant scene respectively. But I think that even if that had not happened, the auxiliary work had allowed these two people to experience profoundly and clearly significant aspects of their own lives through their involved participation, which would be therapeutic.

If the selection of an auxiliary is based on tele,

then it stands to reason that the role for which an auxiliary is chosen is likely to be therapeutic for the auxiliary too. I appreciate that in small groups it might not always be possible for the selection of an auxiliary to be totally based on tele. However, I participated in a training group that had only seven members for a whole year. Some of us may not have been present at some sessions. And yet, the auxiliaries were often moved by the chance to play a role that had personal significance in their lives.

Being in another's shoes can generate new insights for the auxiliary to take to his or her own life situations, thus allowing him or her to think and act afresh well after the original psychodrama is over. Playing a hitherto unfamiliar role can alert an auxiliary to his or her own actions, capabilities, feelings, beliefs and attitudes, as evident from the examples I have presented above.

To give another example, in a psychodrama this year, the protagonist was enacting her struggle between virtue and decadence that appeared as two opposing extremes. As the drama progressed she realized that each of these extremes was embodied by her mother and father respectively. This enactment led an auxiliary, who had taken the role of virtue, to get in touch with her own issues around growing up under the influence of a strict disciplinarian mother who put very high premium on virtue. What was significant to the auxiliary was the fact that she had never thought it possible that she could publicly acknowledge the harsh treatment she as a child had received at the hands of her mother. The relief and awe in her voice and body language were palpable as she gave voice to her painful truth for the very first time.

Taking up the role of another could also allow an auxiliary to expand his or her own repertoire of roles. Hollander (1979) makes a similar argument by suggesting that the auxiliaries can get opportunities to portray roles usually shunned or scorned as they represent characteristics that a society might find distasteful, for instance,

cruelty. A full enactment of such a role, in addition to enabling an emotional release for the protagonist of suppressed feelings, can be of value to the auxiliary. "...Auxiliary ego likewise is benefitted by possessing a creative context in which to express that which in any other context would be an undesirable expression!" (p. 7).

Therapeutic Value of Auxiliary Work for the Group as a Whole

"The psychology of action cannot divorce the act from the actor, the actor in situ, and the single actor cannot be separated from the ensemble of actors in situ." (Moreno, 1953, p.682)

Moreno obviously gave significant place to group action methods for therapy. It seems to me that he could not have postulated this without auxiliary work being of therapeutic value to the whole group. Moreno defined Psychodrama as "...the science which explores the 'truth' by dramatic methods. It deals with inter-personal relations and private worlds" (1953, p.81). The social and the psychological are intertwined in Moreno's way of thinking about the human condition. So what are the specifics of this relationship which could have bearing on the question of therapeutic value of auxiliary work for the whole group?

As I noted earlier, Moreno argued that a role is "... a fusion of private and collective elements; it is composed of two parts - its collective denominators and its individual differentials." It follows then that the extent to which the roles being enacted are a part of 'the collective', or represent social/cultural conserves familiar to or shared by the group members, each member could benefit therapeutically from their enactment, re-construction, or elaboration in a psychodrama.

Pitzle (1991) among others has argued that often a person chosen to play a role that the protagonist needs to develop might be a member who embodies the relevant role/qualities for the protagonist. Such choices reflect

with remarkable intuition what s/he sees in the other person. "Participants participate with one another in a literal sense of the word, taking part by taking parts, finding parts in themselves to find reflected in the parts of others. In this way a kind of universality is dramatised in the group; a sense of shared community, within and among, is celebrated." (p. 24)

Recently in a psychodrama group, the notion of being seen to be 'nice' seemed to strike a chord with several members. Those acting as auxiliaries in the drama expanded the role quite extensively, bringing into focus complex connotations of this word as experienced by them in their lives and work places.

Zerka Moreno based on their (J.L. and Z. Moreno's) fascinating work with a family reports the auxiliary roles that each member, young and old, was able to undertake as different members came center stage in a series of sessions, resulting in largely satisfactory family dynamics for all members. She concludes, "One may consider changes due to both cognitive awareness as well as emotional satisfactions, catharsis and integration, or to 'reframing'. Perhaps one thing that was learned is that in order to *act* differently, one must learn to *see* differently" (1991, p.72).

I think that auxiliary work in any group has the potential of letting members *see differently*, be that in relation to their life away from the group on or off the psychodrama stage, or the interactions within the group.

To summarize then, I would like to reiterate that auxiliary work when undertaken in accordance with the considerations discussed above is a highly skilled act with therapeutic potential for the protagonist, the auxiliary as well as for the group as a whole, within and beyond specific psychodrama contexts. •

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