

# Distortion, Praise and Authenticity: The Power of Mirroring

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Research has proven the need for positive social interactions for a child to survive (Poulton et al., 2020). A parent's job therefore is to create a nurturing environment in which the child experiences themselves as being safe, loved and valued. For many of my clients their parents failed miserably in this duty of care as their particular way of engaging their child was through control, judgment and criticism. The child had repeated experiences of being victimised, humiliated, shamed, patronised and pathologized until their confidence was eroded, their perception of self skewed and their ability to relate severely impaired. Somehow however those children survived into adulthood and maintained a small kernel of hope for a different future that led them to sign up for an eight week skills based programme for women on anger management, identity, self worth and assertiveness. That's when my work begins as I lead this self development programme.

Although the clients come voluntarily to the programme and want to learn and grow, they have suffered long term abuse that has left them hyper-sensitive, closed off and well defended. My role as a therapeutic guide either in a group or one to one is to assist these clients to free themselves from their past trauma. Moreno says, "...every true second time is the liberation from the first." (Moreno, 1983, p. 91) meaning that through psychodrama it is possible for a person to have a new experience, one that corrects, repairs or frees the person from the original trauma they suffered. As a skills based rather than therapy programme I focus on education and coaching and find mirroring to be a particularly useful process to assist development. This article highlights theory related to mirroring that informs my practice and describes my application of it in the self development programme.

**The Stage of the Mirror and Developmental Process of Mirroring**  
In a general sense mirroring is a process of reflection that informs a perception of self. It begins in early childhood and continues throughout life.

Kellerman states that mirroring "...is based on universal interpersonal feedback processes that evolve during our entire lifespan to reinforce our sense of self." He goes on to say, "Looking at ourselves in the mirror forces us to repeatedly come to terms with who we are, even though we continually change. This process of 'mirroring' is in fact a central and inherent part of 'being in the world,' since it helps us through life to synchronize the reciprocal interaction between the outer world and ourselves." (Kellerman, 2007)

Moreno's notion of child development and philosophy of sociometry, role development, spontaneity and creativity underpins the theory and concept of both the stage of development known as the stage of the mirror and the technique of mirroring.

Moreno identifies stages of development as 1) the matrix of all identity (primary narcissism), 2) the double (where the child does not yet experience as separate and voices what is not yet voiced), 3) the mirror (the outside reflection where the child begins to differentiate self from other) and 4) role reversal (when the other person exists even if s/he is out of sight) (Moreno, 1952). The stage of the mirror occurs as a part of early childhood development usually between the ages of around 3-4 and half yrs. According to Gwen Reekie (1997), "Mirroring enhances a person's awareness and recognition of oneself." The stage of the mirror is a process of maturation and formation of the self that occurs as the child receives mirroring from a variety of sources e.g. literally looking in a mirror, comments from parents, interactions with friends, etc., that shape and grow their perceptions and beliefs about their identity. Cooley (1902) used the metaphor of the self as a mirror, or a *looking-glass self*, to illustrate the idea that an individual's sense of self is primarily formed as a result of their perceptions of how others perceive them.

The view of mirroring within social psychology maintains that children develop in interaction with certain main caretakers who either stimulate or inhibit their emotional and cognitive growth as well as their sense of self. These significant others convey an outer social reality with which the child can identify. In the dialogue with this outer social reality, the child becomes an object for itself, thus developing a self as object (*me*). The self as object, or the social self, is the first conception of a self and grows from the perceptions and responses of other people. (Kellerman, 2007)

Relating to Moreno's role theory Casson describes how the process of mirroring occurs: "In the mirror the 'I' observes 'me' (I observes myself); I am audience of my own performance; the subject 'I' and the object 'me'. 'I'

instruct 'me' (I tell myself what to do, direct myself self.) The client is audience to his own behaviour, his observer ego is suddenly engaged and the smile of recognition shows some insight was achieved." (Casson, 2004, p. 58)

Casson's description of mirroring resulting in a smile of recognition however is not always the case as the experience a person has of being mirrored by someone else depends on the role relationship with the person providing the mirroring and what it is they are mirroring. Zerka Moreno describes mirroring as when the client "...sees herself as others see her." (Horvatin, 2006, p. 41). This process becomes complicated when the mirror provided creates a distortion in the person's self perception. It is this phenomenon that is central for the clients attending the self development programme.

### Distorted Mirroring

A useful metaphor I use to explain the concept of the distorted mirror to my clients is the hall of mirrors found at a fairground where a person can stand in front of a mirror and see their reflection grossly changed either elongated, shortened, widened etc. As a sideshow at a fairground the distortions are typically a source of amusement however such distorted mirroring also occurs in reality and can result in long lasting damage.

The notion of a distorted mirror is mentioned by a number of people. In her book *Psychodrama: Group Psychotherapy as Experimental Theatre*, Eva Roine describes an example of the distorted mirror occurring when a protagonist sets out a scene: they often give very unpleasant descriptions of the auxiliary egos in the scene. Moreno calls this the *distorted mirror technique* because the protagonist usually disregards objective reality and presents a distorted picture. (Roine, 1997, p. 106-107)

Zerka Moreno differentiates three different possible distortions that can occur in mirroring, "The portrayal of the actual person may differ greatly in many respects from the picture the subject has of that person. It can be seen easily that a number of distortions of the role can thus take place: (a) the distortion that comes from the auxiliary ego himself as it is coloured by his own experiences; (b) the distortion which the subject suggests to the auxiliary ego because of her subjective experiences in reference to the person to be portrayed by the ego; and (c) the distortion may come from the actual person". (Zerka Moreno, 2006, p. 38) For my clients usually all three of these distortions are at play and require quite a lot of unangling in interactions.

It is the long lasting damage created by distorted mirroring that I aim to correct in the work we do on the self development programme. This approach is well expressed by Clayton and Carter, "Mirroring is designed to increase human awareness. It is not intended to promote evaluation; either

an accepting evaluation or a condemning evaluation. It's not designed to promote any kind of evaluation. It's designed to heighten awareness, to enlarge our senses and through the enlargement of our senses to enable us to enlarge our whole being." (2004, p. 43)

### Long Term Effects of Distorted Mirroring

The effects of mirroring can be defining and long lasting. "We continue to rely on the various more or less appreciative responses towards us all through life." (Kellerman, 2007) Sometimes, when comments are made often enough, a person begins to believe them as true and they begin to fit their self image into the shape defined by those viewpoints.

As part of my preparation for leading the programme on self development I consider what has contributed to the clients' beliefs about themselves and how their identities have formed in early childhood. The starting point for most of the women attending is in Transactional Analysis terms "I'm not OK". They tend to be highly self critical and have a perception that there is something wrong with them, that they are not good enough and in many ways are inferior. It is my assessment that they have developed this perception of self as a result of the mirroring they have received.

Having repeated experiences of distorted mirroring in early childhood has been a major contributing factor for the afflictions the women present on the self development programme. I have heard innumerable accounts from clients' childhood that reveal how labelling, critiquing, attacking, coaching and conditioning have been used to correct, change, ridicule or drive the client as a child to accept a distorted view of themselves.

For example Mary grew up with a mother who was constantly critical about how Mary looked. Throughout Mary's teenage years her mother would make negative comments pointing out that she was too fat and would insist on putting her on a diet. Growing up, Mary believed what her mother had presented to her so by the time she was an adult coming to me as a client Mary identified herself as fat, ugly and bad.

Another client recounts an interaction with her mother when she tells her that she got 98% in a school exam. Her mother's reply was, "Well why didn't you get 100%?" Despite being a successful student she could never seem to be good enough. No matter what her endeavour, her mother would typically focus on the gap and find her wanting.

As I see it the problem lies initially with the person providing the mirroring. Often what is done is a misguided attempt to correct a behaviour or build a particular concept e.g. of being an attractive or academically successful woman. In contrast to Clayton & Carter's view expressed earlier, the person mirroring is typically focused on evaluation, usually a condemning evaluation. Their approach generally suggests they have

taken a superior position, have an idea that the individual needs fixing in some way and conveys a lack of generosity of spirit.

As a clinician I see the negative impact and consequences for many women that I consider have been subjected to 'distorted' mirroring. The effects are far reaching. One client described her situation where her partner has been calling her names and criticising her, she has snapped back provoking him to physically attack her while her 14 year old daughter watches the event. The client has ended up in hospital for yet another broken bone and is angry but resigned and oblivious that there is anything wrong about the situation — to her this is just how it is. This scene of domestic violence is not uncommon amongst the clients attending the programme. Typically these clients are unable to differentiate between what is appropriate and inappropriate; their ability to express their feelings is severely inhibited; their way of engaging exemplifies what they have learned i.e. to be critical, judgmental, harsh, advising, demanding; they are unable to sustain long term respectful relationships; they are well defended and oriented to the world as a hostile place.

## Feedback and Praise

Moreno's intention and use of the technique of mirroring to me differs from feedback and praise. Both feedback and praise tend to have contaminants that interfere with a person's freedom to make their own conclusions about what they consider to be positive or negative or what awareness they might develop as a result of the mirroring. The authentic mirror portrays what has been seen or heard and leaves the judgement or conclusions about that to the individual to reach for themselves.

Originally feedback was the label describing the a high pitched squeal coming through an electronic or speaker system when there is a return to the input of a part of the output of a machine, system, or process. Negative feedback was used to describe in electronic terms "feedback that tends to dampen a process by applying the output against the initial conditions" and that of the positive variety to mean "feedback that tends to magnify a process or increase its output." Feedback emerged as part of our language in the 1970 and 80s as a method of critiquing someone's behaviour intended to be a form of coaching or guidance. A derogatory description of the experience is that of a shit sandwich — *something critical sandwiched between something palatable*.

Praise is predicated on evaluation in contrast to authentic mirroring which is free from evaluation. In a recent discussion in the self development programme focusing on the use of praise, a group member stated that she did not trust it as it felt false. She felt she was being patronized. She described that the mirroring came across as mechanistic as if she was being given a pat on the head. There was no specific information about what was

observed by the person providing the mirroring and she was not able to get any useful information that might have been helpful for developing her own self awareness.

Distorted mirroring including praise and feedback can have long term negative effects. Countering these requires significant therapeutic work. In the self development programme clients are assisted by experiencing what I describe as authentic mirroring as a means of expanding their self awareness. In the next section I describe what I mean by authentic mirroring and what is required to be an authentic mirror.

## On Being an Authentic Mirror

I describe an authentic mirror as one where the reflection is one of generosity and acceptance that the person being mirrored is ok and not needing to be corrected or fixed. The authentic mirror is based on respect to self and others and mirroring is given without conditions. As Casson (2004) says, accurate mirroring becomes a source of empathy, and is central to Moreno's philosophy of the encounter between people as the basis for healing and growth.

There are a number of things to take into account to be an authentic mirror. As we mirror a person, ideally, we warm up to being generous and loving towards them and see them for all that they are, not what we might want, or not want, them to be. Authentic mirroring provides an accurate portrayal of a person's functioning.

The challenge is to warm up to unconditional love that does not demand that the other person changes to please us or relate to them as if they need fixing in some way.

Often a relationship contains conditions that are invisible that can interfere with the mirroring process. An important aspect is to think about what assumptions and expectations either oneself or the other person may be holding about the relationship and what impact these might have e.g. if there are authority issues. An authentic mirror takes account of the relationship and connection with the person they are mirroring and the impact the mirroring might have.

Another important aspect has to do with warm up and a person's readiness to receive mirroring. If the other party is not willing to receive anything and you still go ahead then the mirroring is imposed, boundaries are crossed and that is unacceptable.

## My Application of Mirroring in the Self Development Programme

Typically there is considerable work to assist the women on the self development programme to come out from behind their defence mechanisms, initially building rapport and establishing group norms that create a welcoming, respectful climate that will encourage them to soften

and free up enough to share their experiences. One group guideline is that advice giving is discouraged. Another is that we convey a generosity of spirit and relate to people respectfully. In such an environment group members learn that they can relax, that they can share their experiences and will be accepted for who they are. It is not unusual for someone to say at the end of a session, "Normally I don't say much in a group but I felt comfortable to talk here". Group members value the supportive nature of the group and understanding that comes from sharing experiences. They mirror each other validating each other's pain and accepting each person as being "ok".

My approach in the programme is to regard all interactions as potential opportunities where mirroring might be of value. Because the focus is on skills development there are particular things that I focus on all of which are inherent in the functioning of an authentic mirror.

I attend to my relationship with the clients as it is important that they feel trusting, open and willing to receive the mirroring. For example this might involve me asking permission before providing coaching, first acknowledging a person's intent, encouraging appreciation and companionable generous enquiry.

If I or someone else has provided modelling I ask what they notice about the impact of that. I ask what their experience was when others tell them what to do and draw attention to moments when a person seems to be rejecting of mirroring. These approaches often result in discussions about the importance of asking rather than assuming that providing mirroring is appropriate.

While I may teach models and concepts to help understanding, my job is also to assist integration through reflection, application to their own story and actual practice.

I encourage them to role reverse, to make assessments about situations, communication and relationships and distinguish between ways of being that might be productive or counterproductive. I encourage them to listen to their communication and what warm up this is likely to produce. I get them to be attentive to language noticing words that indicate a need to tell or advise.

Although the stated purpose of the group is not therapeutic, the process of sharing their stories, coming out of isolation and learning to relate respectfully is therapeutic. The mirroring they receive from each other and me makes a difference.

## Conclusion

My reflections on mirroring are drawn from many years of working with clients applying what I have learned through psychodrama. The particular client group that I believe have suffered from distorted mirroring are women who have low self esteem, little self awareness and are often victims of

domestic violence. I have found these women have benefitted from experiencing what I call authentic mirroring, that is offering an accurate reflection of what is observed in a spirit of love and respect and without conditions.

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