

# Tauhara Encounter: Reflections on a Residential Psychodrama Group Session

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## KEY WORDS

audience, auxiliary, creativity, director, doubling, encounter, mirroring, Moreno, production, protagonist, psychodrama, psychotherapy, reflections, relationship, role, role reversal, sharing, spontaneity, tele, warm up

Since 2013 I have co-led with either Marian Hammond or Selina Reid, and have twice led by myself, an annual winter residential psychodrama retreat at the Tauhara Retreat Centre located above Acacia Bay on Taupō-nui-a-Tia, Lake Taupō near the centre of Te Ika-o-Māui, the North Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand. On each occasion I write copious notes describing workshop sessions and my initial analyses and reflections on them and I jot down insights from between-session or end-of-day discussions with my co-leader. The process of writing while memories and impressions are still fresh captures what in days, even hours, may be unrecoverable. When I warm up to re-entering the stream of consciousness I had during the session I often perceive more than I did when in the group. These are unpolished perceptions. They include wonderings or conflicts that I form into questions or pose as contrasting points of view and they sometimes cause fragments of associative thought to surface from deep within my psyche, or a new perspective to suddenly appear like the bright green tip of a spring bud.

This piece of writing assumes there is much to be gained from having a close look at moments of psychodramatic group work recorded in notes such as those described above. This may expand the awareness of readers about how psychodrama theory and practice is being expressed by the writer and encourage reflection and discussion on how and why directorial choices—including those occurring to a reader—might be refined to benefit the work of a group.

In this paper I first describe and later reflect upon a series of enactments occurring in one 2-hour psychodrama group session that features encounters of mutual rejection and mutual acceptance among group members. The descriptions begin with the following introduction to the session.

## Introduction to the psychodrama session

It is the third evening of a 4-day residential psychodrama retreat and the August skies over Lake Taupō are a palette of luminous blues brushed pink by the sinking sun. Inside the large group room, a black-steel woodburner muffles the agonies or ecstasies of once-living limbs being carbonised to heat the space. In front of the burner thirteen group members and two group leaders sit in a semicircle of cushioned chairs. The session is twenty minutes old and brief reporting back from the afternoon sessions—when the group divided in two, each with one of the group leaders—is complete. For ten seconds or more no-one speaks. Some group members fix their gaze on the floor or on some other feature in the room. Others look around the group making visual connection with other group members or glance away.

Susie and Dean [all participant names are anonymised in this paper] are group members sitting beside one another near the middle of the semicircle. Susie's express purpose for attending the workshop is to speak from a place of connection with her being and to sustain a feeling of interconnected involvement in the group. Dean is committed to expressing his truth about the social anxiety he experiences in groups both to himself and to the group "rather than putting on a false face." Two or three times during the first two days of the workshop he unobtrusively leaves the room for several minutes to settle himself before returning. This morning he communicates to the group leaders and to those group members who are present at breakfast that he will "take the morning off because I need it for self-care."

Later I write the following description of the group session.

## Director's description of the group session

Susie is sitting upright in her chair with an air of readiness for action about her. She turns her upper body towards Dean and says she is annoyed with him for not coming to the morning sessions today. She adds that her annoyance probably says more about her than about him and she hopes he won't take it personally. Dean listens while tilting his head towards Susie and confirms that he isn't taking her annoyance personally, in fact, it may be useful to him because one of his purposes for being in the group is to reflect on the effect he is having on other group members. Dean goes on to say that although he experiences social anxiety, he is also a *strong and resilient survivor* of rejections and bullying both at home and at school over many years. I am struggling to hear the softly spoken dialogue between Susie and Dean so I crouch down and move quietly towards them and by now I am sitting on the stage three or four metres away from them.

Susie appears to be thoughtful in response to what Dean has said and a few seconds later she purposely turns towards me to declare: "I don't know

how to say what I want to say. I feel caught between not wanting to hurt him [Dean] and not wanting to remain silent.”

During these exchanges two aspects of Susie stand out prominently to me, namely, she is well motivated to communicate with Dean as seen in her body tone and her use of reflective-relational language, and her turning to me rather than continuing to impress her annoyance upon Dean may be a creative expression of self-care. I relate to her as the most spontaneous member of the group at that time.

I also value Dean’s open-minded responses to Susie and his ongoing promotion of the freedom to experiment. Susie’s and Dean’s efforts to tune in with one another draw them to form mutually positive tele relations (Moreno, 1946), albeit tentatively at this stage in their encounter. The group is also giving Susie and Dean their cooperative attention, which is an expression of the group’s culture being positively influenced by the presence of mutuality between the pair, and in response to the totality of the situation I recognise and instantly warm up to producing what my colleague, Philip Carter (2009), describes as “the drama [that] is right in front of you”.

### The interview phase of Susie’s drama

With a few words I invite Susie to join me on the stage to explore the conflicting roles she is experiencing and she accepts. As we stand together, I address the whole group in an attempt to warm everyone up to perceiving Susie as an *open learner* who wants to communicate more effectively with Dean in the presence of the group. In my imagination I see Susie warming up to a wider range of abilities with which to resume her encounter with Dean. I feel cautiously confident about my intervention; confident I am well motivated to work with creativity and spontaneity, and cautious to enable rather than restrict an interpersonal encounter that might otherwise be unfolding.

The interview continues with Susie and I both standing on the stage. She describes the internal conflict drawing her away from Dean, and I seek to produce this in action with a view to the whole group gaining clarity about her current functioning, which may in turn assist the development of an inceptive plan for the action phase of her drama. The metaphor I utilise for doing so is the Focal-Conflict Model developed by French (1952) and later “modified and extended for application to group processes” by Whitaker and Lieberman (1964, p. 39), where “events in a group-therapy session are conceptualised in terms of a slowly emerging, shared covert conflict consisting of two elements—a disturbing motive (a wish) and a reactive motive (a fear)” (p. 19). Once set out and enacted, Susie has an auxiliary on the right-hand side of the stage enacting her disturbing motive and saying: “I want to be honest, express the truth, and live life honestly”, and two auxiliaries on the left-hand side of the stage enacting her reactive

motive, one of whom is concerned about whether confronting Dean is a kind thing to do and the other about whether it is even necessary. As the conflict between these opposing motives intensifies, tension grows and I wonder what solution Susie, her auxiliaries, and the audience will come to. Will it be restricted to “alleviating fears [...] at the expense of satisfying or expressing the disturbing motive” (p. 23), or will it enable both alleviation and some satisfaction or expression of the disturbing motive? With the outcome seemingly hanging in the balance, Susie suddenly turns to me and says: “I’m aware of the words clamouring in my mind wanting to be said and the caution is holding them back.”

### The action phase of Susie’s drama

Susie’s words are a clear articulation of both a dramatic purpose and a dramatic plan. There are words clamouring in her mind *to be said* and caution *is holding them back*. I call for the stage to be cleared and direct Susie to concretise the clamouring words using objects or people. She briskly picks up two cushions and places them in the middle of the stage naming them “bravery” and “spinelessness” respectively. I direct Susie to walk around the peripheral warm up space circling the concretised words and soliloquising her thoughts aloud. I choose multiple auxiliaries to be her doubles and direct them to walk in a single file close behind her amplifying her physical actions, words, and emotions as she expresses them, like a Greek chorus. With the assistance of their doubling and choric mirroring Susie’s self-acceptance and self-awareness increases and she gives voice to the familiarity and frustration she feels for the concretised words. When I direct her and her doubles to maximise both what they are saying and doing, Susie leads them in striding more forcefully, quickening their pace, and yelling out to the universe cathartically. As her spontaneity peaks Susie suddenly becomes conscious of a past trauma and its effects on her that have never been adequately abreacted—literally an ‘ab’ [meaning ‘away from’ in German] reaction, Breuer & Freud’s (1893) term for a person’s cathartic reaction to trauma, expressed in action and or speech, which may discharge the effects of trauma in whole or part—and this causes her to stop walking and confess like a *repentant imposter*: “I’m the one who is spineless. That cushion is about me!” She continues to speak of self-rejection and self-disgust as stemming from an incident many years ago when she witnessed a 12-year-old school friend being bullied by other girls at their boarding school and did not speak up in her defense.

My first impulse is to produce the boarding school scene in keeping with Moreno’s (1953) imperative that a catharsis of abreaction must be followed by a catharsis of integration. Unlike Freud’s psychotherapy where “language serves as a substitute for action: by its help an effect can be abreacted almost as effectively” (Breuer & Freud, 1893/2009, p. 8), in

Moreno's psychodrama the production of action provides the protagonist "with a new and more extensive *experience* of reality, a 'surplus reality'" (Moreno, 1953, p. 85; emphasis added) where anything conscious or unconscious not expressed outwardly in the original situation is now expressed (Clayton, 1990).

Again, I call for the stage to be cleared, thank the departing auxiliaries, and direct Susie to set out the scene at her boarding school. As she collects props from the edge of the stage, I interview her for role as her school-girl self by asking: "How old are you? ... Where is this boarding school located? ... How often do you get to go home?" In response Susie warms up to being back in the girls' dormitory and she provides a commentary while recreating the dormitory scene on the stage: "Our beds are in a line over here ... and there are partitions ... this is the partition that's between each of our beds, and ..."

Suddenly Dean stands up from his seat in the audience, takes three or four steps towards Susie and me, and protests: "This is not fair! I can't be expected to be a passive observer and to be called spineless and not have a chance to defend myself. I am not spineless. I'm a strong person, and you [Susie] have no idea about the social anxiety I live with and what I need to do to live with it." After a pause he adds: "I'd rather you [Susie] just said what you have to say to me, and then I can respond."

**From protagonist-centred psychodrama to in-person encounter**  
Dean makes a dual challenge. Firstly, he challenges me as the director for presuming he will be a passive observer in the audience and not defend himself, and next he challenges Susie for calling him spineless, before inviting her to "just say what you have to say to me and then I can respond." His functioning as a *deft situational assessor* who addresses relevant issues sequentially and as an *open communicator* inviting a person-to-person encounter is admirable to me. As part of his assessment, he is likely to have experienced the telic relationship between Susie and I as mutually positive, and from me to him as neutral at best, perhaps weak negative. Indeed Susie and I are building mutually positive tele during the production of her drama while my expression of positive tele towards Dean is minimal—it is more felt than expressed—initially because Dean's early assurance that he is not taking Susie's criticism personally frees me psychologically to focus on Susie's emergent conflictedness, and later during Susie's drama I tune in to the audience as a whole rather than to Dean specifically, resulting—I now realise—in me being only vaguely aware of him. My perception of these telic relationships in the moment when Dean interrupts Susie's drama is depicted diagrammatically below.

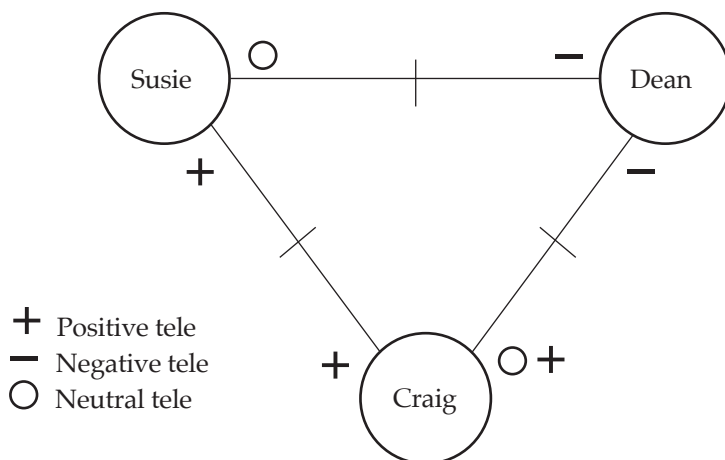


FIGURE A: TELIC RELATIONSHIPS AT THE MOMENT DEAN INTERRUPTS SUSIE'S DRAMA

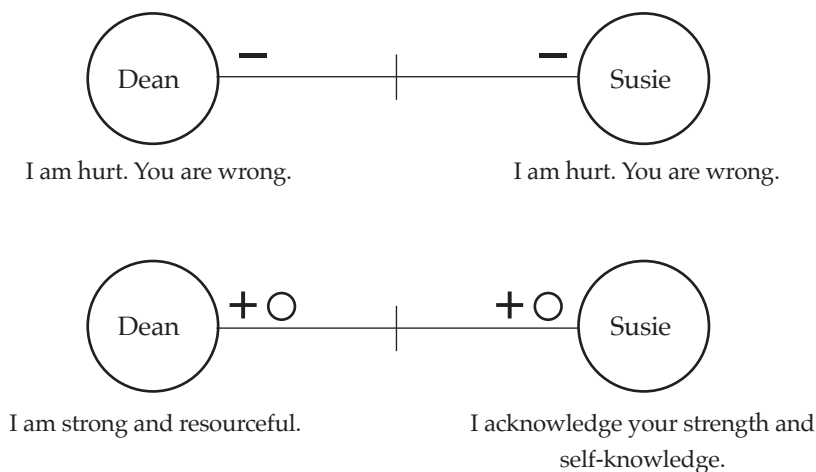
Following this moment of realisation, I walk over to Dean while also asking my co-leader to stand beside Susie as her double, which she does and they exchange smiles of acknowledgement with one another. Dean is now sitting in his chair again and I sit in the empty chair beside him previously occupied by Susie.

There are a variety of contemporaneous expressions from audience members though there is no audio-visual recording that captures them all. Tina picks up her chair and carries it around the back of the audience placing it close behind and to the right of Dean in the double position. Simon moves to squat beside Tina joining her in tuning in with Dean. Several voices rise one over the other in discontent about Dean derailing Susie's drama. Evelyn strides into the centre of the stage gesticulating with her arms like a clapperboard to signal the resumption of the drama. Somewhere amongst all of this I make a statement to the whole group about every person in the room having their own construction of reality about what has happened and is still happening, and in addition, while the presence of mutuality in the group is an indicator of greater commitment to cooperative work and of greater satisfaction for group members (Clayton, 1993), such mutuality might be either mutual acceptance *or* mutual rejection. This latter point gives a few group members something to think about and mutual relations in the group lift a fraction.

I have come over to sit beside Dean to support him to continue to pursue his purpose for being in the group. I figure that the whole group needs him to keep going. Anything less would restrict group members' sense of the meaning and purpose of the group. To get through such an existential crisis the group requires effective leadership.



I gently enquire of Dean about the permission he gave Susie to express herself, knowing as he did that what Susie had to say said more about her than him. He agrees that he did support her to express herself, but he didn't know abuse would be directed towards him. Her calling him spineless echoes his high school bullies and having confronted them in a guided restorative justice process as recently as five years ago he has no intention of letting Susie get away with that. He continues to relay his realities quite fully to the whole group by making several statements that are supplemented by his doubles or interjected on by opposing views among the audience, and each time there is a pause for a few seconds — this happens three or four times — I look directly at Susie standing on the other side of the stage being doubled by my co-leader and ask her: "What are you warming up to now?" Susie is evidently maintaining the strong warm up to spontaneous living that emerged during her truncated drama and instead of being conflicted, as she was when addressing Dean at the beginning of the group session, she is now softer, more empathic, and is making small but perceptible overtures of acceptance towards him. He sometimes spontaneously accepts her mirroring of his self-acceptance. Their movement from symmetrical rejection to tentative complimentary acceptance is depicted in Figure B below.



**FIGURE B: MOVEMENT BETWEEN SUSIE AND DEAN FROM SYMMETRICAL REJECTION TO TENTATIVE COMPLEMENTARY ACCEPTANCE**

As Dean continues to talk about his life, Susie's ability to reverse roles with him increases and gradually Dean takes on a more reconciliatory stance towards her. This tentative complementary acceptance of one another is new and only partial at this point. Perhaps Susie is being a *respectful foreign visitor* to Dean's life and Dean is slightly relaxing into the

experience of being an *appreciated tourist guide*. Like any 'touring party' the rest of the group have a variety of responses to what is on display; however, most acknowledge a change in the tone of relations between Susie and Dean with nods of approval or by moderating their protests. My assessment is that Dean's and Susie's relationship is fragile and that the doubling each protagonist is receiving is assisting their acceptance of humble mirroring from one another, but that to role test their ability to reverse roles with one another through the production of a classic role reversal by the director would be premature. On that basis I advise the group that the action phase of this work has finished and I direct the group to enter the sharing phase.

### The sharing phase for both protagonists

I set out 4 chairs in front of the audience for Dean, myself, Susie, and my co-leader in that order. The remaining group members resume their seats. The following sharing ensues.

- Tony: Expresses his anger at Dean for interrupting Susie's drama. I ask Tony to locate the source of his anger in his own life, which he does by describing the bullying he experienced at home and school as a youngster. This leads him to empathise with Dean and to reflect on his own journey of self-destruction and self-rejection. He also feels the injustice of Susie not getting to complete her drama, which leaves him caught somewhere between the two protagonists.
- Kate: Has been practicing being straight with people regardless of their response or the effect on their relationship with her. She feels frustrated about how long the whole process took and that Susie's drama was getting somewhere when Dean stopped it.
- Linda: Feels happy with the work and expresses her heart for psychodrama.
- Sophie & Tina: Both feel grateful to the facilitators for holding the process for the group.
- Wayne: Feels speechless. Nearly needed to leave the session when feeling his own dilemma regarding conflict. Heard the call from his mother to join her in fighting against his sister and father.
- Olivia: Experiences the protagonist's feelings of self-hatred and self-annihilation. Was waiting for a role reversal.



- Simon: Expresses several seemingly abstract concepts.
- Wai: Having negative self-thoughts, but perhaps not as many as usual. Feelings came up during the drama and they passed. Still buoyed by last night's drama when she was the protagonist.
- Evelyn: Rejects the facilitators for not "letting it [the encounter] happen." Follows Tony in expressing injustice that Susie didn't get to complete her drama.
- Craig (director): A different director would produce different dramatic work and what I produce reflects what I have developed as a director to date. I recall the anguish I have felt in the past when rejected by others and the value I place on finding new ways to express myself under those conditions.

With the completion of the sharing the evening session ends.

### Reflections after writing up this group session

In 'The Living Spirit of the Psychodramatic Method' Max Clayton states:

*The area of direct expression. [...] That is the encounter or the living encounter between two human beings. It involves role reversal. [...] it's an encounter which takes account of the background, the warm-up and the abilities of the [other person]. [...] A living encounter produces benefits for both people and for the whole group.] It's a breath of fresh air in the room.*

(Clayton & Carter, 2004, p. 206)

From the outset when Susie says to me: "I don't know how to say what I want to say. ... I feel caught between not wanting to hurt him [Dean] and not wanting to remain silent" I am aware that any response I give *will* affect the interaction she is initiating with Dean. So, what will that effect be? To answer that question, I make a clinical assessment; can Susie and Dean currently engage in a psychodramatic encounter that—as Clayton describes—takes account of the background, the warm up, and the abilities of both people? Reflecting on Dean's ability to monitor his level of anxiety and take time out from the group when needed, and Susie's aim to speak up in the group from a place of connection with her being, I decide to support Susie to resolve the conflictedness currently interfering with her speaking from such a place. I hope that Dean will practice self-care while the social and cultural atom repair for Susie takes place. If we successfully resolve Susie's conflictedness perhaps a subsequent encounter with Dean will provide a real-life role test. I know that to direct dramatic work with a protagonist I must be fully committed to the success of that endeavour and so I invite Susie on to the stage committed

to working with her in the first instance and the rest is history. In that first moment what else could I have done?

Several alternatives come to mind. I could discuss my assessment with Susie and Dean with a view to coming to some agreement with them both about how to proceed. This comes under the functions of the psychodramatic interview. Those functions include the development of a strong two-way working relationship between the director and the protagonist (or protagonists), the identification of a purpose for the drama, and the making of a plan for dramatic production that is workable for the protagonists, the director, and the group (Clayton, 1991, pp. 5-12). Such an interview with Susie and Dean could investigate whether they might take turns being a protagonist in two consecutive dramas, one where Susie explores her conflictedness, as she was in the boarding school drama, and another where Dean explores the overdevelopment of his *inner critic* or the underdevelopment of his functioning as a *tender self-empathiser*. Possible difficulties that either of them might experience when witnessing the other's drama could be discussed and provision made for them to receive effective emotional support. The group could be encouraged to organise itself to be of service to both protagonists. In other words, overt contracting could involve everyone in the group.

Another option is to work in the here and now with Susie to encourage her further direct expression to Dean as she sits in the group beside him. This might include doubling, mirroring, interviewing for role, concretisation, maximisation, aside, soliloquy, coaching, and or modelling that involves Susie and or Dean. Other group members could be invited to play auxiliary roles. The sociometry of the group pertaining to some criteria arising from Susie and Dean's encounter might be explored. Action might be produced in the semi-circle of chairs where the group members are sitting, or on the stage and warm up space, or both. An atmosphere might be created where the dramatic work becomes a group drama that not only benefits the protagonists, but profoundly benefits the whole group. This would undoubtedly challenge and perhaps change the group's culture.

Another way of looking at this group session is to consider what might have been done differently at critical moments during the dramatic action that was produced. Perhaps the two moments that stand out most in my reflections are the decision to stop the action phase of Susie's drama and the decision not to produce a psychodramatic role reversal between Susie and Dean.

Stopping the action phase of Susie's drama when Dean walks on to the stage to protest her belittlement of him is my way of acknowledging—albeit belatedly—Dean's role in the encounter that the dramatic work is part of. It is not just Susie's individual drama. The drama is a product of

the initial encounter that took place in the group-centred warm up. That warm up belongs to the group and therefore the drama belongs to the group. As we see after I stop the action phase, the group is not of one mind about whose drama it is. Some, such as Evelyn, Tony, and Kate, identify with the drama being Susie's. Others, namely, Tina, Simon, Sophie, and perhaps Linda, have maintained emotional contact with Dean since the group-centred warm up and readily accept his intervention in the action phase of Susie's enactment as an opportunity for further learning and growth. Perhaps Wayne is captured by the drama as if it is his own, and Wai may still be in her drama from the night before. Notwithstanding this variety of perception, I am unequivocal. The drama is a group drama and Dean is strongly implicated in the first scene. In hindsight it is not surprising that he might protest the slight made against him. He is the real person being depicted and is not just an auxiliary. The moment Dean walks on to the stage the boarding school enactment is suspended and an encounter is underway.

As for the decision not to produce a role reversal so Susie and Dean could deepen their mutual relationship by taking up each other's roles, I understand Max to be saying that the kind of role reversal necessary to create an encounter is not the production of a classic psychodramatic role reversal, but is the role reversal that occurs when both people take "account of the background, the warm up and the abilities of [the other]" (Clayton & Carter, 2004, p. 206). Such encounters might occur, say, between a group leader and a group member, or between two group members who develop a real meeting with one another during a break between group sessions and upon returning to the next group session continue to talk intimately with one another, thus creating an atmosphere of hopefulness in the group that lifts the vitality of other group members (Clayton, 1994). As a result, everyone benefits from their encounter. We see this happening when Susie and Dean take greater account of one another and develop a more complementary relationship, albeit tentatively. The group feels hope that Susie and Dean are making some progress in their relationship. When I bring the encounter process to an end the ensuing sharing phase gives Susie and Dean principally, and other group members also, the opportunity to integrate back into the group following the group drama.

### Concluding comments

In this paper I celebrate the opportunity to have a close look at moments of psychodramatic group work recorded in the notes I make before, during, and immediately after a residential psychodrama group session. In this particular session a group-centred warm up is followed by various directorial choices that have a huge effect on the course of the psychodramatic work that follows. I discuss my rationales for those

choices, explore their effects, and propose alternative ways of responding to this particular group-centred warm up. The effects of doing so on me are both liberating and generative: liberating because such exploration is undertaken in a spirit of acceptance rather than judgement, and generative because the accent is on the creativity inherent in the psychodramatic method and in each of us.

For your part, I trust readers will place themselves in my shoes as a psychodrama director to reflect on what they might have done differently or would hope to do in the future. Perhaps further discussion will be fostered by your reflections either in-person or in print.

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