

Encounter

THE HEART OF PSYCHODRAMATIC COUPLE THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the application of psychodrama principles and practices to couple therapy. In particular, it explores Moreno's philosophy of encounter, that meeting of two, 'face to face and eye to eye', which lies at the heart of psychodramatic couple therapy. Drawing on illustrative material, the author shows the way in which the psychodrama structure of warm up, action and sharing apply in a couple therapy session, with the encounter presenting as the action phase. He also describes the psychodramatic techniques of doubling, mirroring and role reversal as they are used to facilitate the encounter.

KEY WORDS

begegnung, couple therapy, doubling, encounter, love, mirroring, Moreno, natural groups, psychodrama, relationship, role reversal, spontaneity, synthetic groups, tele

On begegnung/encounter: ... seeing and perceiving, touching and entering into each other, sharing and loving, communicating with each other in a primary, intuitive manner, by speech or gesture, by kiss and embrace, becoming one — una cum uno.

J.L. Moreno in *Psychodrama Third Volume* (2012:29)

In recent years, I have been applying psychodrama to couple therapy. There are delightful moments when I realise the ways in which psychodrama philosophy and techniques apply in a couple therapy session, for example, when a couple deepen their connection by taking turns at being protagonist and auxiliary, or when the rich tradition of encounter springs to mind as a couple are fully present, 'face to face and eye to eye'. Such insights sharpen the work. I have come to think of couple therapy as a 'group' process, which follows the psychodrama structure of warm up, action and sharing, with encounter as the action phase, the drama at the heart of the process. In that sense, couple therapy can also be thought of as a form of spontaneity training.

The integration of psychodrama and couple therapy has led to a course, Psychodramatic Couple Therapy Training¹, which embodies psychodrama practice as it shapes and enlivens couple therapy.

J.L. Moreno developed the philosophy of encounter well before he developed psychodrama, describing the highest form of encounter as “the supreme essence of existence” (Moreno & Moreno, 2012:29). Equating encounter and life, he juxtaposes them both with theatre, which he sees as mere deadening re-enactment. “I was opposed to the theatre because of my extreme affirmation of life” (Moreno & Moreno, 2012:29). In his view, theatre and life “are extremes, opposites”, and dancing between these opposites is psychodrama, which “leans toward the encounter as its master guide” (Moreno & Moreno, 2012:28). Encounter is a poor translation of *begegnung*, the word Moreno uses in the original German. *Begegnung* has a broader meaning that includes the idea of an authentic loving meeting, which the English does not quite carry. Can such exquisite existential encounter be taught or facilitated? Moreno’s clear response: For encounter, “there is no specific therapy available. For it there is no therapy necessary. It is a form of therapy in itself” (Moreno & Moreno, 2012:31).

However, that is not the end of the matter. Moreno was a strong advocate for new forms of therapy to ‘treat’ intimate relationships. In his view, intimate relationships have a “co-unconscious and a co-conscious”, that together form an “interpsyche” (Moreno, 1961:234-241). “Forms of treatment are necessary which are able to reach the interpersonal syndromes as deeply, if not more so, than it would a single person. “Interpersonal therapy” represents a special category; it might well be classified apart from individual and group psychotherapy” (Moreno & Moreno, 2012:53). Psychodramatic couple therapy that ‘reaches deeply into the interpersonal syndromes’ can rightly be understood as involving facilitated encounter. A facilitated encounter² may sound like a paradox, but it could be said that at the end of successful facilitation, the encounter begins. Sometimes techniques vanish, and we see the emergence of presence and love, perhaps rightly called true encounter. Furthermore, it is useful to add a distinction that Moreno makes between a ‘natural group’, such as a couple, and the ‘synthetic group’ that meets for most psychodrama sessions and training³. As the partners in a natural group face each other, encounter one another, every expression in every moment has an impact on their lives.

The application of psychodrama to couple therapy brings together psychodramatic concepts and methods, Moreno’s rich philosophy of

1 See <<https://psychodrama.org.nz/couple-therapy-training/>>.

2 Ann Hale (no date) uses the term ‘facilitated encounter’ in a handout entitled Paradoxical Double-Bonding Role Reversal.

3 “I differentiate between natural group, like the family, from synthetic group like therapy and training groups and further, the encounter group which is neither, although it has elements of both” (Moreno, 1957:348).

encounter and his notion of working with interpersonal relationships. A psychodramatic couple therapy session follows the structure of a psychodrama session, with warm up, action and sharing phases, and identifies participants as protagonist and auxiliary. The techniques that are used will be familiar to psychodramatists, but they may not be anchored to positions on the stage as in classical psychodrama. However, each partner learns to mirror, reverse roles and double, often in a verbal form⁴. Concretisation and enactment are used to strengthen the couple's ability to listen well and express vulnerability. The work of the session is for the creativity of the couple to emerge. And as with all psychodrama, the couple bring their 'therapeutic tele'⁵ and spontaneity to this endeavour.

Specifically, the psychodramatic couple therapy session begins with a warm up to clarify a theme, to establish a frame and to develop the couple's readiness to connect, even while fear and anger may be present. At this stage, the two partners mostly express themselves to the therapist, clarifying their concerns and the impact on the 'third entity', their relationship. Metaphors for the relationship can be useful here, such as a 'sinking ship' or a 'toddler learning to walk'. At some point, one person emerges to lead the interaction and work for the 'group' as its protagonist⁶, while the other takes up the auxiliary position. The action phase or encounter that follows can involve the voice, the breath, the eyes and the body posture of each participant. Sharing concludes the session, with its aim of integrating developments. The director adds a structure and discipline to the session, with the aim of developing spontaneity. If all goes well, we see moments of spontaneous depth and true encounter.

Let us now turn to a psychodramatic couple therapy session. The illustration below involves a fictitious couple based on my work with many couples. It has been abbreviated to highlight the essence of the work. It also employs some psychodrama language, whereas in practice everyday language, such as 'listener' and 'therapist', is used.

Jack and Anna: The Warm Up Phase

It is astonishing to know that spontaneity can be trained. We can learn to overcome old imperatives to fight or flee, and instead express heartfelt truth and simply be ourselves. These reveries, playing on my mind as I peruse the notes from the previous session, are interrupted by the noise of an intense argument in the corridor. Jack and Anna have arrived for couple therapy.

4 In *Psychodrama Second Volume* (2011:65), Moreno writes, "All my interactional techniques, including role reversal, double, mirror, etc. ... can be used within the strictly verbal systems of psychotherapy...".

5 Moreno mentions this in *Psychodrama First Volume* (1977:315), where he describes his realisation that the therapeutic agency is not the therapist but the tele between the group members.

6 See Logeman (1999), *The Group And Its Protagonist: The Relationship Between the Individual and the Group*.

Anna and Jack let fly with accusations and judgements, escalating as they compete for the harshest invectives. "Stop!" I say within seconds, as I place my arm between them. My cry leads to a split second of silence. I am determined to be with each of them, no matter how determined they are to be against each other. I trust that they can say everything with the same vitality that they experience through shouting. Anna and Jack are familiar with my functioning as a double and know that they are free to accept or reject my expressions.

First, I sit next to Jack, slightly behind and lower than him. I sink into Jack's being and let his thoughts and feelings flow within me. I express them with sound: "Ahhhh! Ohhhh!" I can see that the woman in front of me is angry. I feel heartache and I let another, more fragile "Ahhhh" come forth. I see a small shift in Anna's eyes and I find myself saying, "I love you so much!" Immediately I move to Anna's side. I find myself looking into the man's eyes, which are momentarily softer. I say, "I am in so much doubt and pain. I can't stand it anymore". I move back to my own chair. While doubling Jack and Anna, I felt the coping impulses to fight and flee as well as their more vulnerable experiences. I have chosen to express the vulnerability as they already know how to cope by blaming the other. Now there is a shift in Anna and in Jack. They take a breath together. Tension drops. They look directly at each other.

Anna: *I want to talk about what happened Saturday night.*

Jack: *Tell me about your hurt.*

Anna has made a request, and in that sense has become the protagonist. Jack is willing to listen. He is her auxiliary. To conclude the warm up, I direct Anna and Jack to concretise the resources that they will need to do this work.

Director: *Think of someone or something from the present or the past who will sustain you and the relationship as you do this work together. When you have found that resource, choose a cushion (indicating a pile of cushions) and place it so you can see it and let it sustain you.*

Anna chooses her Nanna, and Jack identifies the wind on his face beside the sea. These resources can be drawn on and amplified during the session. The warm up phase is now complete. The next step is the action phase which, in psychodramatic couple therapy, I view as the encounter.

Jack and Anna: Encounter as the Action Phase

Director: *Let Anna know you are with her.*

Jack: *I am with you.*

Anna: *On Saturday, I waited till nine o'clock. You told me you would be there. You are never there. You just go out as you please. I've no idea where you are. You are not a teenager.*

Anna's tone is sharp. She is almost pointing her finger. She is angry. I feel the pain at the root of the anger and move rapidly next to her and look at Jack.

Director as double: *When you did not turn up, I thought you were completely unreliable. I felt alone, lost, desperate.*

From the corner of my eye, I sense her subtle nod.

Anna: *I just don't know where we went wrong...*

The more significant a relationship is, the greater the possibility for earlier unmet needs to surface. I suspect that this is the case for Anna. As her double, I assist her to express this viscerally disturbing experience in a way that Jack can hear. I name this doubling, in the classical psychodramatic sense, because I experience myself as Anna and speak in the first person from a position slightly behind her. I trust that the doubling will lead Anna to speak from her experience, without blame. Now the question is, can Jack be with her? It is difficult to step into the other's shoes when the other is full of rage directed at you! To listen to the partner's hurt is almost impossible when they perceive you as the source of their pain. Can Jack recover from what he has no doubt experienced as a personal attack and navigate a path through his own resistance? Can he be Anna's auxiliary? Can he continue to hear Anna?

Jack: *You hate it when you don't know where I am. We have gone wrong somewhere.*

Director: *Yes. Well done!*

I have returned to my chair. Jack is now mirroring Anna, as he has learnt to do in a previous session.

Director: *Tell him what you feel.*

Anna: *(crying) I'm scared I'll be alone. You're never there for me.*

Amid the tears, the pointing finger of a blaming fighter: "You're never there for me". I see that Jack feels the impact of the accusation. I have a choice. I can assist Anna to delve deeper into the fears beneath the accusations, and thus cease blaming Jack. However, I choose to double Jack to help him stay attuned to Anna, to see the pain behind the blame. I sit with him and express, in a soliloquy, my sense of his intentions.

Director as double: *I don't like being told I'm never there. It's not never. Right now, I'm here with Anna. I can do that.*

I am connected to Jack and have entered his world. His breathing tells me that he has accepted my doubling and reaffirmed his intention to listen to Anna. I return to my chair and encourage Jack to look at Anna and tell her what he sees.

Jack: *I can see how you don't like being alone.*

Jack has become a mirror⁷. In my experience of directing couples, an effective sequence at the start of the interaction is mirroring followed by role reversal, that is, stepping into the other's shoes and validating their values, and then doubling the underlying experience, which leads to deeper intimacy. This sequence is different from the understanding of these concepts in the spontaneity theory of child development⁸. Moreover, the way in which the couple enact the techniques may not involve the usual positions on the stage as in classical psychodrama. However, the therapist or director has usually provided plenty of classical doubling.

Anna: *I want you to know how painful it is when you just ignore me.*

Blame has crept in again with the words, "You just ignore me", which obscure Anna's feelings. I wonder about her unmet need, what it is she sees, thinks and feels with that word 'ignore'. I sit next to Anna and help her to express her experience.

Director: *I think you ignore me when...*

Anna: *When you go out and don't text me and turn up at all hours.*

Director: *Then I think...*

Anna: *Then I think you don't care about me.*

Director: *And I feel...*

Anna: *Worthless, alone.*

Director: *I yearn for...*

Anna: *I yearn for someone who will think of me, keep my needs in mind.*

In this sequence⁹, the wisp of guidance is enough. Anna accepts my lead lines and completes them herself. Perhaps the best word for this is a coaching double, as it is both coaching and 'being her' at the same time. As I enter Anna's world, I see that the coaching is accepted. Once more, the focus turns to Jack. He has already mirrored Anna. Is he now able to step into her shoes? I return to my own chair.

Director: *Let yourself step into her shoes.*

Jack: (taking a moment to reflect) *I get how you would feel alone if I don't keep you in mind.*

Anna: Nods.

Director: *Are you with her?*

Jack: *You want to trust I'm on your side, that I'm reliable.*

Anna: *I can't trust you. I want to trust you.*

7 Kellermann describes mirroring in some depth in *Lets Face it: Mirroring in Psychodrama* (2007:91).

8 See Moreno, 1977:47.

9 I learnt the sequence, 'see, think, feel, underlying universal need' from Marshall Rosenberg's 2003 book, *Nonviolent Communication* (Kindle Locations 678).

Jack has tuned into Anna's experience and put words to her fears, fears that she has not yet spoken and may only be vaguely aware of. At the same time Anna's expression, "I can't trust you. I want to trust you", is a subtle accusation. It implies what she does not say: 'You are not trustworthy'. Jack turns away, bursting to say something. Has Anna been well enough heard? For now? I look at Jack. I decide one more step might be useful.

Director: *What do you imagine Anna is thinking when she says she wants to trust you? Tell her.*

Jack: *You think that if we can't sort this out, it could be the end of us?*

Anna: *I don't want that.*

Director: *(offering a lead line) And then you feel...*

Jack: *Then you feel scared.*

Anna: *Yes. I hate it when we come so close to splitting up. I'm terrified of us splitting up.*

Jack: *You're terrified.*

Anna: *Yes.*

Jack is doubling Anna, not in the classical form of standing next to her or using the term 'I', but by expressing her fear. His accurate doubling leads Anna to clarify her experience. She is terrified. At this point, I decide upon a 180° turn. I commend Anna and Jack for their efforts with one another so far, Anna for showing her vulnerability and Jack for doubling Anna and helping her to express her feelings. I now suggest that they switch roles, that Jack become the protagonist and express himself to Anna.

Director: *Take a deep breath. Look at each other.*

Director: *Anna, you are now entering Jack's world. What do you see as you look at Jack?*

Anna: *He's gone somewhere else.*

Director: *Can you find your curiosity and find a way to be with him? Take your time ... let him know when you are with him.*

Anna takes a moment and their eyes connect. She is with him. She has tuned in with Jack.

Director: *Can you see where he's gone?*

Anna: *He's angry and holding it in.*

Director: *Say that to him.*

Anna: *You are angry.*

Jack: *I want to be independent. I resist being trapped. That does not mean I don't love you.*

Anna: *You don't want to be trapped. You want to be independent.*

Director: *And...*

Anna: *And you love me.*

Anna is listening, which assists Jack to express himself. He is without malice and that makes it easier for her to continue to listen.

Jack: *I love what I do. I'm with people all day. That's how I achieve what I do. I get involved. I hate it when you keep calling and texting, especially when you barged into that meeting the other day.*

Anna: *You hate it when I hassle you by texting and barging in on you.*

Anna has achieved the mirroring step and I commend her. Can she go further? Can she role reverse with Jack and then double him, speak for him so he experiences her with him?

Director: *When I step into your shoes and see the world through your eyes...¹⁰*

Anna: *(taking a moment) It makes sense that I am intruding on your space.*

I see by Jack's eyes, breath and a movement of his head that Anna has made sense of his experience. She has stepped into Jack's shoes and role reversed with him. Can she now double him?

Jack: *I don't want to live in fear of you controlling every move I make.*

Anna: *You are scared I'll control you. You want me to trust you.*

Yes, Anna is doubling Jack. Immersed in his world, she is able to put words to fears that he may be unaware of. And we are back with the word 'trust'. Trust is such a bundle of thoughts and feelings. Can Anna help Jack unpack them? In an open neutral inviting posture, she waits for him to say more.

Jack: *I want to tell you to back off, but I think you will take that the wrong way.*

Anna: *You are scared I'll take it the wrong way if you tell me what you want.*

Jack: *Yes.*

Director: *Stay with him. You are scared...*

Anna: *You are scared I will reject you.*

Jack: *It's more that we will have a standoff.*

As the therapist I wonder, what does he want instead of the standoff?

Director: *You want...*

Anna: *You want to feel connected to me.*

Jack: *Yes.*

Anna reaches out to touch Jack. This is progressive movement, and I encourage them to fully experience their encounter.

Director: *Experience her touch Jack.*

Jack takes a moment to experience Anna's touch more fully.

¹⁰ The couple are familiar with my prompt, which is drawn from The Motto in the introduction to *Psychodrama First Volume* (Moreno, 1977).

Director: *Let your body express how you feel.*

Jack chuckles, stands up and hugs Anna.

Director: *Slow down. Take in what you are receiving... Notice what you are giving.*

The encounter is the therapy in this moment and I sit back in my chair. Anna and Jack are present with each other. They have moved from blame to authentic expression of deeper feelings, from external circumstances to what I call the level playing field of fear and pain. She is terrified of the relationship ending and he is afraid of a standoff. Paradoxically, this expression of vulnerability is the pathway to love and connection. In experiencing this intimacy, Anna's and Jack's ways of being are both novel for them and adequate. In psychodrama terms, this is a moment of spontaneity. Encounter is some-times just such a "simple moment, one flash of true, genuine spontaneity which emerges from a real person" (Moreno & Moreno, 2012:29). I now propose that we move to the third phase, sharing.

Jack and Anna: The Sharing Phase

In the sharing phase of a classical psychodrama session, the audience members share their responses which assists them to integrate their learning. Meanwhile, the protagonist listens and integrates the value of the work. In psychodramatic couple therapy, the partners have shared their responses during the session. However, a sharing phase can be satisfying here as well, to highlight significant moments, integrate learning and make the transition from therapy to everyday life. As in all psychodrama, the director is active in producing good sharing¹¹.

Director: *Tell each other how that was for you. Listen to each other.*

Anna: *I did not know you wanted to be connected like that. It was good to see you open up.*

Jack: *You really listened to me so carefully.*

I think Anna will benefit if she knows specifically what she did that led Jack to experience such careful listening. I offer a lead line.

Director: *I love it when you...*

Jack: *I love it when you sit still and wait for me to find what I want to say. Thank you.*

Director: *How does the connection now relate to the beginning of the session when you were fighting?*¹²

11 See Tom Wilson (1984), *Sharing in Psychodrama as a Directed Experience*.

12 In the powerpoint presentation, *Learning to Life* (Anna & Logeman, 2017), one guideline for the sharing phase of a psychodrama session recommends linking resolutions to the 'common syndrome' that emerged during the group warm up.

Jack: *I need to remember to listen. I want you to know I'm working on it. I want you to trust me.*

Anna: *I want to trust you.*

Director: *What is one thing you might do differently?*

Anna: *I want to figure out why I get so scared. It's to do with my mother not being there for me.*

Anna is in touch with her childhood experience, and this is a warm up to the next session where the work may take the form of a drama with Jack as a witness and companion¹³.

Jack: *I will text you when I'm late.*

Jack has proposed a behavioural change. This can be reviewed, and possible obstacles faced, in future sessions.

Director: *Thank you both. It is a pleasure to be here with you. I'm touched by seeing your love come through.*

Conclusion

The application of some of the central features of psychodrama to couple therapy makes good sense, while envisioning the action phase of the session as an encounter enables the therapist to bring their training as a psychodramatist to the heart of the work. The three phases of psychodrama, warm up, action and sharing, structure a psychodramatic couple therapy session. The participants take turns as protagonist and auxiliary while the techniques of mirroring, role reversal and doubling take on a new form. The director is active during the warm up and the encounter, assisting the protagonist to speak from the heart without blame, and the auxiliary to mirror, reverse roles and double while simultaneously being impacted by the partner's expression. Quite an ask. We close the session with sharing to highlight the most significant moments, integrate the learning and look to the days ahead. The illustration provided in this article demonstrated the way in which this works in a natural group, where the couple were not re-enacting life during their encounter but living it in the moment. Ultimately, psychodramatic couple therapy aims to foster each person's spontaneity, creativity and self-direction, and for love to heal past hurts.

In my work as a couple therapist, I have come to realise why Moreno called his major work on sociometry and spontaneity, *Who Shall Survive?* I see the way in which violent and destructive patterns of interaction can impact negatively on couple and family dynamics through many generations. The transformation of these outdated patterns into new adequate ways of being with one another is essential to our survival.

¹³ Trainees learn to do this in Psychodramatic Couple Therapy Training. For more details, see the Manual (Logeman, 2019).

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