

# The Value of Sociodrama in Psychodramatic Couple Therapy Training

WALTER LOGEMAN

## KEY WORDS

couple therapy, Moreno, psychodrama, psychodrama training, psychodramatic couple therapy, relationship, sociodrama, sociodramatic couple, systems, tele

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the value of sociodrama in the training of psychodramatic couple therapists. The author describes the way in which a sociodramatic approach is employed to bring to life a 'sociodramatic couple', who later become the focus of training sessions in which the trainer and trainees explore the effectiveness of various interventions in couple therapy practice. Drawing on the illustrative material, the author reflects on the value of sociodrama in the development of the trainees, at both conscious and unconscious levels, and raises the possibility of applying a sociodramatic approach to training in related fields, such as individual therapy, family therapy and organisational development.

## Introduction

I use sociodrama to train people in psychodramatic couple therapy (Logeman, 2019, pp. 35-46). This method of training is a delight, and I am inspired to write about it. Through sociodrama, the trainees create a social system and a 'sociodramatic couple'<sup>1</sup> who come alive in scenes of birth, death and love. Love inevitably leads to trouble, and the couple arrive at the therapist's door. The trainees then take up the roles of therapist and partners in the couple relationship to explore, experiment with and practise psychodramatic couple therapy. While the main modality used is sociodrama, which focuses on social roles ranging from stereotypical to typical to roles that include all the unique qualities of a person, as we shall see, this training approach integrates many aspects of the broader

1 As far as I know, the term 'sociodramatic couple' has not been used before. A more generic term, and one applicable to many forms of training, would be 'sociodramatic client system'.

psychodrama method, including sociometry, role training, group work and spontaneity training.

The sociodramatic approach has evolved over time within the broader development of psychodramatic couple therapy training. In the initial training groups, one trainee presented a client couple. However, I soon realised that this raised matters of confidentiality and more problematically, the work was focussed on a sole trainee's supervision needs and did not foster a sense of free experimentation. I also engaged the trainees in short role plays to practise technical skills but found these somewhat mechanical. The eventual introduction of sociodrama and the sociodramatic couple addressed these issues and transformed the training.

A sociodrama, emerging from the life in a group of trainees, is a qualitative shift away from simple role-play and introduces the elements of surprise, experimentation and lived experience. It is independent of, and yet connected to, the dynamics of the training group and the trainees' involvement in it is close to their involvement in life. As the trainees warm up and act in the sociodrama, a social system, with a sociodramatic couple coalescing at its centre, emerges with beauty and complexity. The trainees 'live the lives' of this couple, their family members and friends, experiencing attraction and rejection, sounds and silence, shifts in mood. In so doing, they develop spontaneity, creativity and insight, which they later bring to the role of couple therapist, experimenting with and practising interventions in their work with this sociodramatic couple. The following section, involving a fictitious training group and composite events, describes this process while abbreviating some aspects to highlight the essence of the work. While I am the group's trainer, I employ the conventional psychodramatic term 'director' when producing action on the stage.

### **The group warm-up**

We begin with a multilevel psychodramatic couple therapy training event, where some trainees are experienced psychodramatists, some are new to the psychodrama method, some are experienced couple therapists and others are beginners. The warm-up starts with an exploration of the trainees' individual areas of interest, which are diverse and compelling:

- How do I begin a session?
- I'm interested in affairs.
- What if one of the partners walks out?
- I want to be less anxious.
- What about violence?

### **Production of the Sociodrama**

With the level of warm-up in the training group high, I stand up to signal

the move to the action phase. This involves the production of a sociodrama, and the social system and sociodramatic couple that emerge from it.

### *Creating a social system*

Director Together we will create a social system, and within it is a couple who will come to therapy. As you take on the roles, see if you can bring to life an opportunity to explore your question of interest. We are co-creating, so it may not look as you expected. We accept everyone's contribution as a truth about the couple.

*A group member steps onto the stage and others follow.*

Caroline I'm Mary. I'm 34 and I'm 5 months pregnant. Joe's the father and we separated just before I knew I was pregnant.

Arthur I'm Bill, Mary's father, and I think she needs to get back with Joe. He's a good bloke.

Director *To Caroline as Mary:* Mary, choose someone to be Joe.

Before long, we have clusters of people on the stage: Mary and Joe, our sociodramatic couple; Tracey, Joe's 12-year-old daughter from an earlier relationship; Mary's father Bill, and Sue who is Bill's ex-wife and Mary's mother. At this stage, I do not produce interaction between the people in the sociodrama. Indeed, I often restrain interaction until the social structure is established.

Director *To group members:* Who else is here?

Adelle I am Alice, Mary's closest friend.

Rita I'm Janice, Joe's mother. My husband is long gone.

Tracy *To Janice:* You're my grandmother.

As the family system develops on the stage, I conduct interviews for role<sup>2</sup>. The answers to my interview questions come from the imagination of the participants, who are in the realm of surplus reality<sup>3</sup>. They disclose details that they might never say in real life and others on the stage may feel the impact, even though they know this is private information. The ensemble is developing an unconscious dimension.

Director *To Sue, Mary's mother:* You are looking at your daughter, what do you experience?

Sue I feel so sad as I see her there with the baby inside. That's me. I did not want to marry Bill. But we did marry, and we were together for 27 years.

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2 I suggest you follow this link <<https://vimeo.com/213632785>> to a video of Max Clayton (2017) where, at 7:16 minutes he speaks about the art of the interview for a role. Most inspiring!

3 Moreno (2012, pp.18-19) describes surplus reality as a "... level of structuring which represents the intangible, invisible dimensions of intra- and extra-psychic life, ... it means that there are certain invisible dimensions in the reality of living, not fully experienced or expressed...".

During the development of the sociodrama, I produce moments that will deepen the participants' warm up, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

Director      *To Sue:* So that was about 34 years ago (Mary's age). So what year was that?

*A group member identifies the year as 1986 and I place a large cushion on the stage near Sue.*

Director      *To Sue:* How about you be there in 1986 (indicating the cushion). Do you remember the songs on the radio? (A group member begins to sing Like a Virgin by Madonna, others join in.) How old were you when you were pregnant with Mary?

Sue             I was 19 when she was born, so I was 18.

Director      Be 18 and feel the baby inside you. Breathe into her. (Tears are welling as Sue experiences the baby.) Choose someone to be Mary as a baby.

Director      *To group members:* Before we fade out from this scene in '86, does anyone have something to express to others right now?

Mary           *To Sue:* You are a great mum, but it did not help that you stayed with Dad for so long.

We now have two Marys on the stage, one as a baby and the other as a pregnant woman.

Director      Let's return to the present day. Sue, your baby's grown up. You are about to become a grandmother.

*I place a large cushion near Mary to represent her womb. In a flash, Lindsay is in the womb as Mary's unborn baby.*

### *Exploring the sociometry*

As the sociodrama 'goes live, I take the opportunity to explore the sociometry. Such an exploration will reveal the tele, that is, the web of attractions, rejections and ambivalences amongst the participants in the system.

Director      Tele tends to persist. It is a felt experience. Be who you are in the drama. Have a look around at the family and friends. Breathe. Notice your response as you look around. Put one hand on your heart and make the other like an antenna. Feel what you feel and follow your antenna to the person you have the strongest positive feelings for. Put your hand on their shoulder.

As the participants move, the constellation of relationships on the stage transforms. The mothers connect to their children, and Mary and her baby nestle closer. I note that Joe has chosen his unborn baby. Surprisingly, Bill has chosen his son-in-law Joe. Tracey is with her grandmother.

Director Express yourself to the person you are drawn to.

The sociometric exploration continues with the question, who are you least attracted to? This is followed by an exploration of ambivalence. Significantly, for the purposes of this training, Mary and Joe, the sociodramatic couple, are mutually ambivalent.

### *Producing interaction*

With the closure of the sociometric exploration, I turn to produce interaction in the system.

Director It is Saturday afternoon, 3 pm. Where are you? When I say go, go there and do what you do, interact with others. This may seem chaotic but trust your experience and bring it forth. Sometimes you may not be acting at all but find yourself in your own life drama! Trust that, and you will have an opportunity to express that in the sharing at the end. I will pause the action from time to time so that you can see what others are up to. Go now and do what you do.

Movement and chatter follow as constellations form and reform. After a few minutes, I pause the action and, like a TV journalist, I drop in on one cluster after another to investigate.

Joe and Mary, our sociodramatic couple, are arguing. They love their unborn baby, but do they love each other?

Joe Remember, I earn the money. I work my butt off!

Mary *In tears:* You just don't get it.

We see an interaction between Tracey, Joe's 12-year-old daughter, and her grandmother Janice.

Tracey Can I come and live with you Granny?

Janice Oh! My dear girl. Let me give you a hug. Of course, you can come and stay! But since your parents separated you live with them week about.

Tracey I hate it at Dad's place. And Mum is always tired and crabby.

In this way, each of the clusters is visited and its activities and dynamics are revealed to the members of other clusters.

### *Identifying a Sociodramatic Couple*

A crucial moment in the sociodrama takes place when Mary and her closest friend, Alice, visit a naturopath named Victoria:

Mary Thank you for these herbs. Do you think they will really help with the cramps?

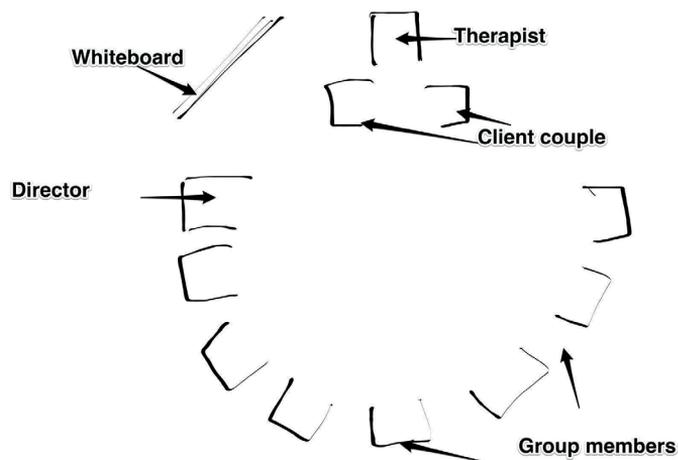
Victoria They may do, but I imagine stress is contributing to your tensions.

Alice           What about you and Joe, Mary?  
 Mary           Joe wants to come back one minute and then he changes his mind. I'm the same. I had just moved out and settled into my own flat when I discovered I was pregnant.  
 Victoria       I know a good couple therapist that you and Joe could go to see.

At this point, I judge that the sociodramatic couple has emerged and bring the sociodrama to a close.

### The Training Session using the Sociodramatic Couple

The trainees take a refreshment break and then return to the training room, which I have set up as indicated in the diagram below. As they take seats in the semi-circle of chairs, they notice a familiar set-up on the psychodrama stage before them. It is a couple therapist's office, with two facing chairs for a couple and a therapist's chair.



My intention now is to create a warm-up to couple therapy training, to signal that their work as trainee therapists is about to commence. I inform the trainees that Mary and Joe, whose relationship and social world were explored in the sociodrama, will now become the client couple seeking therapy in this training session. The trainees orient themselves to the work and create a list, on the whiteboard, of the elements that they consider should be achieved in the first therapy session. Their suggestions include:

- Initial contact
- Engagement
- Data collected
- Fees

- Hope
- What they want
- Empathy
- They interact

Director      In this session, we'll be focusing on the first two elements, the initial contact and engagement. The engagement phase will be complete when a connection has been established with each partner in the couple and a plan made for the work. How about someone volunteer to be the therapist?

Sam             *Stands up:* I'll give it a go.

Sam is an experienced couple therapist and has attended several psychodramatic couple therapy training workshops. He sits in the therapist's chair, as indicated in the diagram above.

Director      *To Sam as therapist:* I believe you know about Mary and Joe?

Sam             Yes, Mary rang and made an appointment.

Director      What do you know about them?

Sam             Just that they have been separated and they want to get back together. This is the crucial phase of initial contact, which can be complex. Sometimes the therapist has received information from one partner but may know little about the other partner. On this occasion, things look promising. But is Mary a reliable spokesperson for Joe or even for her own experience? We shall see.

Director      *To Sam:* Mary and Joe are in the waiting room.

By now we have already had different participants portray Joe and Mary and others in their world. Soon everyone in the group will have at least one turn at being one of the partners. Each participant is both true to the emerging character of the person they portray and contributes to it. The sociodramatic couple exists in our drama independent of the auxiliaries who portray them. Two trainees volunteer to take up the roles of Joe and Mary. They place a few chairs in a corner of the stage to create the waiting room. In the waiting room, Joe makes a point of sitting some distance from Mary.

Sam             I'll do the meeting and greeting.

Director      *To the group:* Whatever this sociodramatic Joe and Mary do and say, we will incorporate into their story. Their experience here will go with them into new scenes and new people taking up their roles.

*Sam stands up and walks into the waiting room.*

Sam             *To Joe and Mary:* Hello. Welcome. I'm Sam.

Joe This is Mary and I'm Joe.

Sam Come on through.

*Sam ushers Mary and Joe into the therapy room and they sit in chairs opposite each other.*

Joe *To Sam, moving his chair to face Sam:* Mary asked me to come because she wants us to get back together. I've told her that I want that too but only if she does not try to control every move I make.

Sam *Waving his arms to mentally erase the scene and turning his head to make an aside:* I understand what is to be done, but already I have lost my confidence as Joe begins in that way. I'd like to start again.

Director Ok, rewind. The last moment did not happen. Stand up and breathe into the new... Sam, Mary and Joe stand up, take a breath, sit down again, and begin 'Take 2'.

Sam *To Mary and Joe, assertively:* Take a moment to arrive. Take a breath (a moment of silence). Have a look around. ... Look at each other.

*Sam suggests that Joe and Mary make eye contact. While this takes a few moments and some encouragement, Mary and Joe eventually look at each other for a significant amount of time. Sam, calm and centred as the couple connect, continues:*

Sam If this therapy goes really well, what would be the outcome for you? I'll listen to you each in turn. You first Mary?

Mary We would be back together, be parents together and feel the love we have for each other.

Sam You'd be together, be parents and feel the love you have for each other. Thank you.

Sam What about you Joe?

Joe Yes, I'd like that too.

Sam Say more Joe.

Joe When Mary says we love each other (*tears almost visible*) and that she loves me (*trailing off*).

Sam Follow that thread, Joe.

Joe *Turning towards Mary:* I do love you ... very much.

Sam Wow, that is the direction we can go ... together. I'll keep listening to each of you in turn.

Director *To the group:* There has been a powerful experience in these first minutes of the session. Let's have some discussion about what we notice and name interventions and the principles that they draw on. First, Mary and Joe, how about you both make an aside regarding how the therapy is going for you so far.

- Mary *Turning her head to make an aside:* As Mary, I was about to walk out when Joe said I controlled him all the time. I was furious. Then in the retake, I did get into doing it afresh. I was surprised at how different it was the second time.
- Director Tell Sam, as the therapist, what made the difference.
- Mary *To Sam:* It was your suggestion to look into Joe's eyes. I felt the baby in me, and then I really did feel the love for Joe.
- Joe *To Sam:* I was disarmed by your immediate instruction to look around the room and then at Mary.
- Joe *To Mary:* I was swept off my feet when you said we would feel our love again.
- Director: What do you think Sam?
- Sam: It's great to hear. I don't really know what I did. I just had one word in mind. Presence.
- Rita *A group member:* That question, what is your best hope for the therapy, that's the miracle question from solution focussed therapy. It's so much better than asking them about their problems.

The therapy training session continues where Sam left off. There is animated discussion as the trainees experiment, in action, in the roles of Joe, Mary and the therapist. As the trainer I frequently demonstrate what I would do at moments when the group gets stuck. Denice brings forward a concern, which leads to another enactment:

- Denice I was Sue, Mary's mother, in the sociodrama and Mary thought that I should have split from her father much earlier. So do I, as Sue that is! Obviously, it was a bad situation for Mary to grow up in. With that past, I think that Mary would be more conflicted than she has been in this therapy session so far.
- Director At what point do you think that would emerge in the first session? When they first look into each other's eyes?
- Denice They do love each other, so maybe not then. But soon after the eye contact.
- Director Let's go to that moment. Denice, you be Mary.

*Rita volunteers to be the therapist and Denice moves to sit in Mary's chair, as Mary. She takes a moment to warm up and then expresses herself to the therapist.*

- Mary I don't want to be doomed to repeat my parents' dead life! I won't do that. Staying together for the sake of the baby sapped the life out of my mother and out of me. No way!

*Rita is not satisfied with her response to Mary and steps out of the chair. Other trainees take turns to experiment as the therapist. Denice, as Mary, repeats her concerns forcefully.*

Mary I grew up with parents who did not show any love to each other. Not once!

*A little later Rita returns to the therapist's chair, ready to offer a new intervention. She looks at Mary then Joe and then moves to stand behind Mary and double her:*

Rita *Looking Joe in the eye:* Joe, I love you. But I won't be in a relationship that kills my spirit.

*Immediately, Rita moves to stand behind Joe.*

Rita *Looking Mary in the eye:* Mary, I love you. But I won't be in a relationship that kills my spirit.

Rita *Back in the therapist's chair:* Have I got that right Mary? Have I got that right Joe?

Mary Yes. We have the love my parents did not have.

Joe This is good! I want to do this work with you Mary. Do you think we can do it?

Mary *Looking towards the therapist:* What do you think? I want to.

Director *To the group:* Is this couple engaged in the therapy?

We look at the whiteboard and see that engagement is the second essential requirement on the list. My question is rhetorical!

Over the following days of training, I produce further sociodramas where the trainees 'live the lives' of the sociodramatic couple, their family members and friends. Through the sociodramatic interaction, the characters and their life stories develop. Joe and Mary express tentativeness about their future together, more so than anticipated in the first sociodrama. Joe discloses that he has become interested in another woman. Joe and Mary also attend to childhood issues that are influencing their relationship, Mary regarding growing up with parents who lived their lives in coping modes and Joe about his absent father. I can add that the work had a happy ending. Mary and Joe are living together and looking forward to the birth of their baby girl.

### *Sharing*

Towards the end of the training event, the trainees and I sit in a semi-circle facing the stage. We look at the empty chairs of our sociodramatic couple, Mary and Joe, along with a few scattered cushions to represent their family members and friends. I introduce sharing, the essential third phase of sociodrama.

Director It is time for sharing. There are three areas to focus on, and you can do that in any order. One is sharing from the role, what emerged while you were in the roles of people in this system? Then your personal sharing, anything from your experience

and your personal life that you are aware of? And lastly, learning that you will take away as a couple therapist. This might be to do with techniques, but hopefully more about your growing identity as a couple therapist.

The trainees share extensively in the three areas that I have indicated. Carolyn's and Denice's sharing, which follows, is typical of the group and demonstrates the impact of the sociodrama on the trainees. Denice's sharing is abbreviated to highlight the connections between the roles she enacted as Mary and her own life experience.

Carolyn      I knew straight away I was Mary. She came to me well before I stood up. I had no idea at the time why I knew she was pregnant. It is so obvious now (hesitating, flooding with feeling). I've never shared this in a group.

When I was 16, I got pregnant. I knew the father, who was also 16. We were not ready for this. I could not tell my parents, but he told his. Mine were ok about it once they found out and got over the shock. We planned to have an abortion and just before that, I miscarried. We were in love, but the relationship crashed and burned. We were too young. As Mary, I felt the love for Joe, and it brings up this teenage romance. So sad. My parents were not in a dead relationship, but I am hot on not wanting to be fused like my parents. I fight for my independence.

At the start I was interested in affairs and while Joe did not really have one, I learned a lot about how to work with ambivalence as a therapist. I am more confident, especially after that moment when I was the therapist and helped Mary listen to Joe's story about the other woman. I really got my head around how to double the listener. I see how this way of working is different from individual therapy and how powerful it is, as therapy, for the individual partners in a couple and how that helps the couple resolve issues and grow.

Denice      My parents were in a dead relationship! They stayed together for the baby, and the baby was me. My mother sometimes blamed me for the fact she was married to my father. It made me feel bad about even being alive. I discovered she loved another man, and I think I always had an uneasy sense of guilt that it was my fault. It was very satisfying for me as Mary to express the healthy idea that I would not live in a dead relationship. It was as if my parents were getting the therapy

they did not have. Later in the drama I was their unborn baby and I felt so secure that these parents would be together out of their love for each other not just because of me.

**Reflections on the value of sociodrama in couple therapy training**  
Sociodrama benefits the training of psychodramatic couple therapists in several interrelated ways. The enthusiasm and enjoyment that the participants' experience through sociodrama facilitates learning.

Beyond this involvement, sociodrama facilitates experiential learning. Trainees learn from sitting in the therapist's chair. They learn to be present with the volatility of the sociometric couple. Participants are immersed in the drama and want to portray what they experience is emerging in one of the characters. We saw such involvement when Denice wanted to enact Mary. This presents the therapist with clients who have a depth that is truly felt, not simply acted. Trainees learn to centre themselves, to quieten the personal turmoil. In some cases, they actively resolve inner conflicts by leaving the therapist's chair and enacting psychodramatic or role-training vignettes. In those cases, the sociodramatic couple provides the role test when the trainee returns to the chair. Rita, in the example above, lost her confidence and took some time to compose herself. At one training event, I recall the sociodramatic couple becoming particularly aggressive to each other and critical of the therapist. Trainees took turns to simply sit in the therapist's chair and experience this moment. A trainee told me weeks later that the experience had helped her to remain calm and present when she later came to just such a moment with a client couple.

As well as embodying the therapist's role, trainees learn experientially by being in the roles of the sociodramatic couple. In role reversal with each partner, they experience the couple's relationship, as well as the impact of the therapy. As they experience every response, movement and word from the other partner and the therapist, they discover which interventions work best. In this regard, the asides form a remarkable function in informing the trainee therapist just how their interventions are 'landing' with each partner. We saw the way in which a trainee, as Mary, made an aside to inform Sam, as therapist, that his suggestion for her to look into Joe's eyes was a significant and effective intervention. At times, the couple therapist might be confronted by an inarticulate partner and the trainee enacting that role can offer insights into the dynamics of the silence through an aside. Overall, the trainees experience the quality of the applied techniques.

Moreover, sociodramatic action negates the need to bring in a real-life vulnerable couple for a demonstration. Instead, the trainees engage with a couple that has 'come to life' through their involvement in a sociodrama. They can experiment with interventions, and experience and discuss the impact of those interventions, knowing that the sociodramatic couple will

not be harmed by a trainee therapist making multiple attempts or losing their way. For example, in the illustration above, we saw Sam, as therapist, freely shape and reshape his responses to Mary and Joe as they responded to each other and him. The participants have a visceral experience, and the learning becomes part of their being under conditions that prevent detrimental impacts.

Moreno's idea that the psychodrama method can be used for collaborative experimentation and research (Logeman, 2015, pp. 51-62) is illustrated by the work with the sociodramatic couple. As we saw in the illustration above, the trainees and I experiment together, trusting the asides of those enacting the roles in the system. We identify principles, share notes and discuss developments. I also offer experimental practice for implementing an already proven approach. The trainees form groups of three and, because they embody a 'ready-made' deep warm-up through the sociodrama, they can take turns as therapist working with the two partners, experimenting and receiving feedback from them.

The most important benefit of working with a sociometric couple is, perhaps, somewhat obvious. During the training, we got to know our sociometric couple, Mary and Joe, intimately. At the end of the training event, the group experienced a moment of grief as we said goodbye to them. Let me be so cruel as to break the illusion. Like audiences in all good theatre, we have suspended our disbelief. Moreno (1977, p. 86) states that "the true subject of a sociodrama is the *group*". It may not have seemed obvious to the participants as they 'lived' the life of the couple and their social world during the sociodrama, but 'they were the couple' and 'the couple was them'. Just as a protagonist embodies the group's focal conflict (Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964) and works for the group to create resolutions so Joe and Mary were the protagonists who embodied the process of this group's focal conflict and its resolution (Logeman, 1996, p. 12). Looking back, we can see themes of abandonment versus attachment and stolid coping versus authentic expression, the resolutions to which were the healing of past hurts and a baby well held by a loving couple. At a mostly unconscious level, the trainees were resolving some of their own past hurts and healing one another as they worked with the sociodramatic couple in their social world. Some of this was made conscious in the sharing, as exemplified in Carolyn's and Denice's expressions. However, some of this healing will work through the participants' lives and be expressed in their work with couples, in subtle and yet unknown ways, in time to come.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how we 'bring to life' a sociodramatic couple. This couple becomes the focus of training sessions, where the trainees and I experiment with different interventions in couple therapy practice.

The sociodramatic approach to training is valuable in several ways. It promotes successful adult learning and facilitates experiential collaborative experimentation. Through the group process, the trainees experience conscious and unconscious healing and carry this forward into their lives and their work with couples. It is worth noting that the use of sociodrama to create a 'sociodramatic client system', could be applied to training in related fields, such as individual therapy, family therapy or organisational development.

I delight in the work with psychodramatic couple therapy trainees. We delight in our sociodramatic couple. Their heart is our heart and the enjoyment in the work, the tears, the pain and the connections are real. The trainees' vulnerabilities are attended to in a therapeutic container that mirrors the therapeutic container that they provide for their couples.

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**Walter Logeman** has a background in teaching, social work and psychotherapy, specialising in couple therapy. He is a TEP (AANZPA) and works as a trainer at the Christchurch Institute for Training in Psychodrama. Walter can be contacted at [walter@psybnet.co.nz](mailto:walter@psybnet.co.nz).