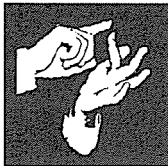


Psychodrama with the Deaf / Hearing Impaired

Letters between Mary Kenny (Qld.) and Richard Hall (Vic.)



Mary Kenny is a psychodrama trainee with the Queensland Training Institute of Psychodrama. She is Co-ordinator of Speak Up For Yourself, Brisbane, Qld.

1 November 1994

Dear Richard,

I am writing to you to exchange information and ideas about using psychodrama with people who are deaf, and to tell you about things I have noticed myself doing as I develop my technique and practice of the psychodramatic method. I am vitally interested in this issue because I have approximately thirty percent of my hearing left and each year my ability to hear the spoken word even a short distance away diminishes.

In 1985, Nancy Lewis, a psychologist, who is profoundly deaf came to Australia. She stayed with me in Canberra, and we discussed different methods of therapy that were useful and successful for deaf people in America. Nancy was practising and lecturing in psychology at the deaf university, Gallaudet College in Washington D.C. at that time. Nancy told me that psychodrama had been very

successful there and enabled deaf people to express feelings, emotions and actions in a way that cannot be described by sign.

Since 1991, I have been knocking on the door of psychodrama, trying to develop my skills as a director in psychodrama and there are things I have noticed that I want to share with you.

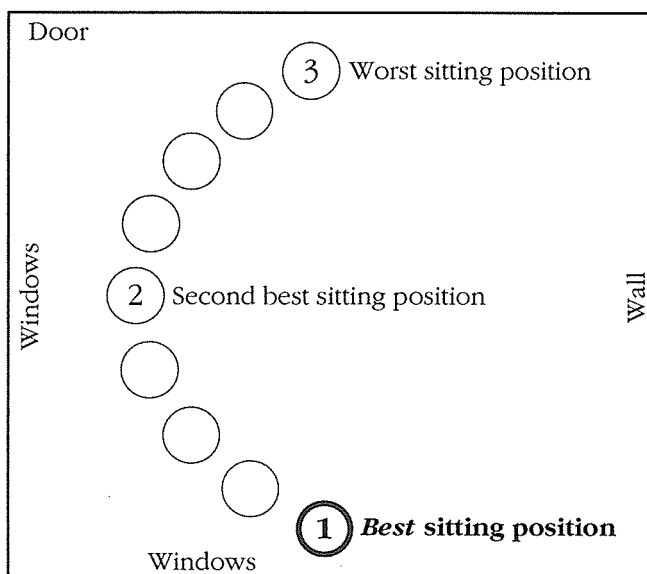
To begin with I shall make a few comments about my experience in groups. In a group I have great difficulty hearing words. The more I try to concentrate on words, the more stressed I become and the more I do not hear. I not only miss the words but all the fine cues that people send out are lost to me. I am no longer viewing the whole person.

Over a period of time I have worked out a few things that assist me to learn and enjoy being in a group. Here are some of them.

◆ *I need one person to speak at a time; eye contact with each person there helps a great deal; I need to*

be alert to and aware of body movements made by individuals in the group.

- ◆ Being aware of my choice of where I sit in a group is a key point as well. If I sit in the middle of a group, I seem to get swamped with all the energy currents that constantly flow through people's bodies. This may sound very new age, but it is not new to me! If I sit on the outside end of the group, I am in a better position to see and observe, and also sense that energy without it swamping me. When I am swamped I cannot discern where the energy is most concentrated and therefore cannot discern who is the most warmed up person. Here is a sketch to illustrate this!



- ◆ When energy shifts occur, I need to bring that shift to my conscious awareness immediately. These energy shifts look like collective sighs, a collective suspension of breathing, a quick movement seen out of the side of my eye. The shift can indicate readiness to go with the group work, or on the edge of

flight from the group, or turbulent anger, or simply boredom.

- ◆ The setting for the group needs to be in a well lit area. People's faces must be in view for me to lip read them. I cannot lip read people whose faces are in shadow, especially when their backs are against those beautiful plate glass windows that allow the outside in, with the accompanying glare.

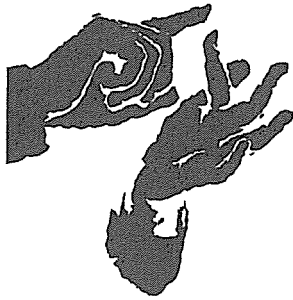
I have a hope that I can develop creative ways of getting the information so that I can be clear about what is going on in the group. Many times I drop great clangers, or seemingly so, and this affects my confidence. I become quiet again looking for ways to remain in the group yet protect myself from looking

too gullible, stupid or ignorant. So I want to be graceful in my manner and not interrogatory, nor distracting by drawing attention to myself. I have spent a lifetime developing an appropriate enquiring clarifier role that builds on the cues I am getting, so I can make responses and make my contribution to the group.

The purpose of the group, and my role in that group, affects

very much how I approach a group. If the group is a social group, I enjoy the **atmosphere** and the way people talk together, laugh, move together and so on. People move easily in this setting most of the time. Shy people may be small in their movements etc, but people don't seem so restrained in their communication with one

another. I can see who is friends with who, and see who is withdrawing from which group, who is the centre of attention. I am more relaxed in this setting as well!



Locating who is the centre of attention at any one point is an important area and means I have had to develop my ability to observe. I find it easier to know who is the centre of attention when I am with other deaf people. Most hearing people make movements too, yet these movements can distract me from what is happening or what is being said.

*With a work group, it is different. We all sit tight in our chairs. There is limited movement of the body, and in the hearing culture, I constantly rove the group with my eyes looking to see who is speaking. Often there is a **movement** that occurs just before someone speaks, for us deaf people*

we move our hands, our bodies become the vehicle for expression rather than our voice. I watch people, looking, yet do not know what I am watching for except a movement of some kind, then when a movement happens I breathe again because for me with this movement there is communication. In our peer group here in Brisbane we have noticed that just before we go to share something we move our shoulders and work our bodies into a certain posture. It is almost like the information we want to share stirs around inside us then wells up through our chest then into our throat then our mouth opens and we speak! I have enjoyed discovering the relevance of this process

I ask myself then 'what do we do when we want to take leadership in the group?', or 'what happens when there is a disagreement?', 'what signals do our bodies make that sets off the energy stream in a certain way?' 'why do some people initiate leadership and people take up their offer, and others try but the rest of the group either ignores them, or says no?'. I do not have a formula to sort these things out. What I sense is that very little of these things are said out loud and it is something about the way we express ourselves that sends the signal or message.

As I mentioned before, locating who is the centre of attention at any one point is an important area and means I have had to develop my ability to observe. I find it easier to know who is the centre of attention when I am with other deaf people. Most hearing people make movements too, yet these movements can distract me from what is happening or what is being said. With hearing people I notice so many people do not look at the speaker, nor do they move their heads in the direction of the speaker.

I am learning that this does not necessarily mean the non-looker is not interested, sometimes it is that he/she listens better without the distraction of looking at the person.

A big challenge for me is to name or identify a theme in the group when I have missed most of the conversation yet I have seen the interaction. There is some indefinable connection between what I see and what others hear and I know my sense has integrity but I need to hone this skill. Sometimes I find myself sniffing the air! We all send out smells and I wonder if groups send off certain smells for certain themes!

All of my directing experience has been with hearing people who talk and act etc. Once the protagonist moves more than two feet away from me I cannot hear them. I may catch some words but I have to rely on lip reading and body movement. My anxiety level is extremely high when I try to operate the same way as hearing directors do. They seem to go by what they hear backed up with what they see. I go on what I see and if I get distracted into getting the words then my warm up changes, I question, interfere in the protagonist's drama and generally feel very unsatisfied with myself. I become very dependent on the words, and these words even when they are repeated several times may not even make sense to me.

When this happens to me I lapse into a very literal, black and white world. This trait is often attributed to deaf people. I know the world is not black and white and that many explanations and assumptions are made that can change my warm up. Even so, the black and white world provides me with a boundary where I can appear confident yet it is overbearing, stilted and lacks

spontaneity. What I am discovering is that my deafness is also my "wooden leg". I claim so many of my incompetencies on my deafness!

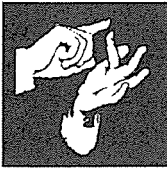
I have discovered and re-discovered that other deaf people are really no different from other people and I have found I need to keep coming back to this realisation. The capacity to develop roles is the same, the world view is shaped by the same factors that affect other people who are not deaf, and there is no reason why deaf people cannot continue to be spontaneous and creative beings!

I think that deaf people are wounded by not having the advantages of access to communication and this causes so much inner and outer frustration and accompanying self doubt, low self esteem and lack of confidence in one's own ability to create. When I am directing I have to move through layers of protection I have placed around myself and somehow become empty of all these things then I can go with the protagonist where words are not necessary, a process takes over, a drama unfolds.

Richard, this is a long letter. I am keen to make contact with you to discuss what you experience and learning has been as you worked with deaf people in Melbourne. I am interested in exploring what you have learned through your groups with the deaf and what impact these have on warm-up and role development.

Regards from,

Mary Kenny



Richard Hall has passed his practical assessment as a psychodramatist. He is a psychotherapist in Melbourne.

18 November 1994

Dear Mary,

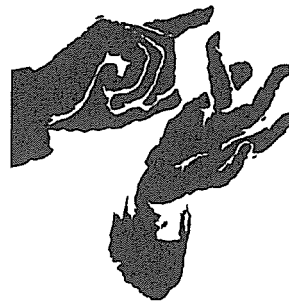
As I read your letter I was confronted by how much and how well you appear to have got on board with the method of psychodrama. I was very warmed by your obvious dedication to finding your way through the many difficulties facing you as you train with your hearing loss as well as the usual difficult spots of learning. I was then tempted to collapse in a heap at the prospect of rising to the occasion to reply. Where would I start? What is it that I have to say? Isn't what you have said enough? The fact that you have a vision of how you want to work impresses me. Hello !

I too have been affected by the work of Nancy Lewis, not directly as you have, but via the writings of Lynette Clayton. I also have been struck how well the psychodrama method assists the deaf which I shall write more about later on.

I was also taken by the positively expressed name of your organisation 'Speak Up For Yourself' – I immediately knew you were on about the deaf developing greater autonomy which has been a major aim of mine in my work with them.

As I reflect on my experiences in working with the deaf, I am amazed to find that they extend back over a period of 20 years ! My career in using psychodrama began when I was a teacher with the deaf and I started to use mirroring in a very playful way with young deaf eight year olds. We would play games like "guess who we are?" which involved

the students or myself mirroring other students or teachers and the other students had to guess who was being portrayed. It was a way of learning the names of all the teachers and learning to observe and attend



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accurately. It was also a way we could resolve conflicts between ourselves. Since this time I have run numerous groups with deaf people at a community centre for the deaf.

My first experience with a psychodrama group for the deaf astonished me and taught me a great

deal about the kind of culture I would be facing many times in working with the deaf in a group. I was going to conduct a psychodrama group and I was informed that the group would start at a particular time, 7.30pm. I carefully set up the room with the chairs forming the stage area and I anxiously waited for them to arrive. Five minutes went by, then ten minutes ... no-one arrived. Then I discovered them all down the corridor in another room having a very animated but silent chat! This was a terrific shock to a new psychodrama director and this moment woke me up forever to the reality of the dependency dynamic that I have come to recognise as predominant within the group life of the deaf community. From that day on I have consistently seen the necessity of working with the many obstacles in order to overcome this dynamic so that a greater freedom of expression and communication is achieved within these groups. The recognition and acceptance of this group dynamic has assisted me to warm up to a complementary role in my leadership function so I can work effectively with the particular group culture that tends to form amongst groups of the deaf people meeting together.

I realised that within this culture I had to take a great deal of initiative, to go to them, to introduce myself, to welcome them into the group area and to create a very definite direction for this type of group work. I am sure that if I hadn't woken up to the fact that they were in another room, and that I hadn't gone home, they would have been there an hour later chatting, waiting patiently for me to appear.

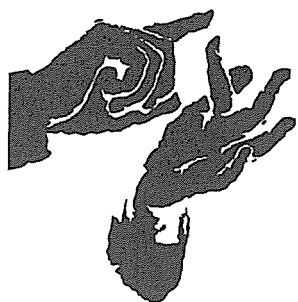
I think that one of the main factors that make this dependency dynamic so strong is the kind of

relationship that is formed between the teacher, lecturer, or guest speaker and the deaf student. The roles tend to be of the teacher as the wise all-knowing authority and the student as the admiring, passive listener. These role relationships are repeated over and over. Many of the people would listen to an explanation and then wait for the next point. I found that my leadership style was unfamiliar to these people who expected me to give them all that they needed. Some felt unsafe and became angry, however with humour and playful enactments members practised the notion of expressing themselves and dealing with the difficulties that arise.

The points that you make about what you have learned that assists you in psychodrama groups are familiar to me. It's very helpful you write in detail about all the nuances of the body responses and movements in the communication that you tune in to in a group. I could see how I can make more use of this area.

I enjoyed your comments and exploration about where you sit in the group. I remember on one occasion where I was sitting at the end of the group which you describe as **Position 1**, the best position, and some of the people in the group became very involved with what I was saying, and got up taking their chairs with them, sat in the middle of the psychodramatic stage and looked at me very intently. I guess this meant that they could more easily read my speech and therefore not miss anything I was saying. Also, they're very used to being lectured to and talked at so the experience of a leader creating a seating position in the group which promoted a dialogue between peers was quite foreign to many of the deaf people who came to my group. I found I had to work

consistently to orientate them to the stage and break up the very strong pattern of always needing to be fully in front of the person communicating. Also, on another occasion one deaf woman told me not to wear a particular colourful



I'd like to say something now about some of the themes that re-emerge. I have found that overcoming isolation is a major area of work that group members warm up to.

jumper. The multitude of colours inhibited her visual ability to comprehend my signing communication. This was a revelation to me!

Going back to those early days, we had quite a challenge to get the people to make a commitment to come! With my training in sociometry I could work out that it would be effective to get the sociometric stars of the deaf community to come along and this would act as a magnet to the cautious folk. It was a great help in getting us started. The Chaplain, for the deaf became the auxiliary for the groups. He invited a variety of people

who we thought would benefit from the experience, some of whom were leaders within the deaf community. When they did turn up, there was a huge range of language abilities, something I hadn't anticipated. For example, I had a deaf man with a theology degree and at the other end of the scale I had someone with 15 word utterance! After the first group the word got around and I became known as 'the psychodrama man'. Over time the individuals who had done the psychodrama group talked about their experiences to others within the deaf community and spread the word!

I'd like to say something now about some of the themes that re-emerge. I have found that overcoming isolation is a major area of work that group members warm up to. For example, a lot of deaf children were taken out of the family environment during weekdays and sent to a boarding institution to be educated. Some were as young as three years of age. I have directed a number of psychodramas focusing on releasing painful memories of that separation from their families.

Isolation occurs due to the lack of communication, whichever method one may use. Here we have individuals who are deaf, and in need of a method of communication, and who are also moved out of their family environment. Hence the connections between the parents and child, plus siblings and child, were weak. Brothers and sisters in some families grew up without really knowing each other at all. In other situations the child goes to a deaf school and learns a signing language and when they go home they're faced with a situation where no-one in the family can 'speak' their language. Another example is where one parent learns sign language and the other

doesn't. This can result in a stronger bond developing with the parent who can communicate more readily and an intense longing in the child to be able to communicate with the other parent.

Isolation is a killer to spontaneity. As a psychodrama director I am always acutely aware of the isolate in a situation. To put the isolate with the sociometric star always assists in the development of new roles.

I have reflected at length on the different languages that are used by the deaf, and those who have hearing.¹ It is a helpful guide to me to think of the deaf as using a picture language and this appears to be substantiated in the relief I see them gain as soon as the technique of concretisation is used. The visual impact of the psychodrama, in addition to signing and lip reading, brings about a terrific increase in communication. Once this point has been reached in the group I have found that the relationships become stronger, expression of thoughts and feelings are greater and there's a great deal of humour. The tendency to rely on the leader drops off and the spontaneity level is high. Conflict can then be brought out which in the past would be hidden away and not dealt with.

There is something about the concretising in itself, without making any use of surplus reality, which has a profound effect. The validation of the experience through the

enactment, the fact that the experience is set out, dramatised, brought to life again through action and feeling brings the deaf protagonist a great source of comfort. It is this process that I have witnessed which has led me to see a very strong link between psychodrama and the language of the deaf person, and led me to think that their language is indeed more pictorial than that of hearing people. For the latter, their language is in fact weaker in pictures but strong in concepts.

Your comment about the tendency for deaf people to be narrowed down through anxiety and that it is very important that the psychodrama director doesn't also do this is something that I have observed in my work as well. My antidote to this, if you like, is to become very able as a role theorist so that I have access at all times to an objective view that will assist me not to give into the woes of anxiety! I think the more we function as role theorists and systems thinkers, the less emphasis we place on the content of what the person is saying but place more emphasis on the overall functioning of the person. This means we, as directors, have a much better chance of assisting a situation to open out rather than to narrow in. I have also found that the technique of mirroring to be of excellent use and I apply it on many, many occasions in my groups with the deaf. The awareness gained deepens the feeling levels of the group

1. There are a number of methods of communication with the deaf. Firstly, there is a method called *total* communication where students are taught to sign and speak at the same time. The method of instruction by the teacher is that of signed English. For instance, everything I say, I sign. The second method is where the deaf are taught to *speak orally* and not with their hands. In Victoria, units for the deaf are now attached to primary and secondary schools. Some of the research has shown that in families where parents are deaf there is a language of its own. This is now recognised and called *Auslan*. This is a pictorial sign language. Teachers of the deaf are now being taught Auslan. Signed English and Auslan are now being used as methods of instruction.

members and, through humour and enjoyment, the experience can be an uplifting one which brings about an awakening without anxiety.

In closing, I must say your letter has stimulated much thought and reflection on the work that I have done over many years. This has proved to be a very worthwhile exercise and I've come to the opinion that it is important for those of us who are committed to the psychodramatic method that we are able to deal with a wide range and variety of people no matter what their communication abilities are. It would be great to have more therapists in the field who have the ability to sign and communicate with deaf people, wouldn't it? It is excellent that we've commenced this dialogue.

With best regards,

Richard Hall