

# Using Psychodrama to Facilitate Victim Empathy in Adolescent Sexual Offenders

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In Auckland, the Leslie Centre in response to an increasing perceived need in the community started a community programme to treat adolescent sexual offenders in 1988 (Lambie & McCarthy, 1995; Simmonds & Houlihan, 1991). This programme has continued to change and develop as research on the subject was published and as the team increased their training and understanding of the treatment issues for adolescent sexual offenders.

It is a comprehensive community programme that incorporates 10-day and 4-day outdoor wilderness group therapy, follow-up group therapy, family therapy and individual therapy. An understanding and use of role theory provide part of the model for how we view and work with the boys across the whole programme. In this paper we will describe how we use the

psychodramatic method to facilitate victim empathy on the programme. We have termed this the "offenderdrama".

Victim empathy is a process in which the offender gains an understanding of the effects of their offending behaviour from the victim's perspective. It is considered an important treatment component in sexual offender programmes as it is thought that if offenders develop a cognitive and emotional understanding of the effects of their offending, recidivism is less likely. As a result, it is included in most sex offender programmes in the United States (Knopp, Freeman-Longo & Stevenson, 1992).

Common methods used to facilitate victim empathy include reading assignments, videos and 2 chair work. However, because it has always been a challenge to develop victim empathy and also difficult to

engage adolescents in therapy, we have employed action methods in our programme. Action methods have enabled us to achieve victim empathy at a deeper level with a group of boys with whom otherwise this may have not been possible.

Adolescence is a developmental period in which when these young people seek to achieve some level of independence from their family and in doing so, discover a separate identity. Peer influence upon their functioning is also of great importance at this time. An adolescent is often self-conscious as to others' opinions and typically more interested in their peer group than adults. Thus, group therapy with adolescents must take into account the developmental stage of the adolescent and recognise the importance of the roles they have developed in response to their family and peers. Some of the significant fragmenting roles that we have observed in the adolescent sex offender include the manipulative aggressor, deviant fantasizer, social isolate and shameful withdrawer. In therapy we aim to develop more integrated and progressive roles including self-believer, clear speaker of truth, responsibility taker and empathiser with others.

During the 10-day wilderness group we work through 8 group levels with the adolescents. For the purpose of this paper we shall only describe those levels relevant to the way we warm the boys up over several days to the offenderdrama. The offenderdrama is a group-centred psychodrama enacted many times and in different ways. Each time this deepens the warm-up of the whole group.

Level 1 addresses group co-operation and the encouragement of others and is an integral part of the entire programme, including the

offenderdrama. We introduce the boys to the idea of role reversal and experiencing another's perspective early on in the introduction to the group and the outdoor activities. These include rafting, tramping, caving, etc. The ideas of understanding another peer are emphasised throughout the 10 days and indeed in the follow-up groups on the programme.

Level 2 is "sharing my family". Here the boys draw a genogram and share it with the group. We gain valuable information of who is important in their family and who may be brought into their drama. At the conclusion of Level 2 we talk in the group about the effects of sexual abuse and during which some boys may choose to disclose personal histories of sexual abuse, which, in turn increases their warm-up to the experience of their victims.

In Level 3 we ask them to draw and then share with the group their most painful and humiliating experience. This, for instance, may be being physically, sexually or emotionally abused, being teased or bullied at school. As they remember the pain and the feelings associated with these events, they become more open to later identifying with the pain of their victim. Without any personal identification, the adolescents are often too self-absorbed to experience any empathy for their victim.

Following this we get the adolescent to draw the victim they sexually abused. They are then asked to take on the role of their victim by standing up in front of the group and holding their picture and saying:

I am ..... and I am ..... years old  
and when ..... sexually abused me  
he did ..... to me.

The facilitators may ask questions

that aim to deepen this experience. These may include: Did you want this to happen to you? How did it feel when he was doing this to you? How has the abuse affected your life?

The level of warm up in response to these activities is often quite

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varied. Some of the boys will be much more warmed-up and showing emotion than others and the adolescent most warmed up is chosen to do the first offenderdrama.

The purpose of the offenderdrama is to encourage the offender to understand the experience of their victim. Initially

we invite the adolescent to choose someone in the group to be his father, mother, and other significant people in their family. The family is chosen first because these are the people to whom the adolescent is most concerned with at this point.

The scene is set and interaction, by reversing roles with each family member, commences and the warm-up deepens. The adolescent is then encouraged to openly tell each family member in detail what they have done. This is then followed by a direction to reverse roles and take the place of the family member. Through this enactment with self revelation and role reversal with family members the protagonist becomes warmed up to the time and place where the offence occurred. The offender is next invited to choose someone to be their victim. The group is very cohesive by this stage which is now 3 -4 days into the course This enables such tasks as the choosing of auxiliaries to proceed smoothly. We do not set the scene in detail because we don't want them to have any possibility of voyeurism, nor do we want to create a situation that could be experienced as a 'rehearsal' via the re-enactment of the abusive situation. A detailed re-enactment also tends to warm up the offender or other group members to being sexually aroused and we associate this with an increased likelihood of re-offending.

The victim is placed on the stage and the adolescent is asked to take the role of the victim. Their physical stature and features are developed by the offender as they start to assume the role, the adolescent often kneeling down to become the approximate height of their victim. This part of the enactment immediately portrays the role system where one person is clearly

dominating the other smaller person. They then role reverse back to themselves, they are asked to stand close to the victim and state in detail what they did to him or her. Following this we role reverse the offender with the victim. The offender, (now as the victim) has the chance to feel small in relation to their perpetrator and the director makes enquires about how it feels to be that small and to be sexually abused?, did they choose it to happen?, can they recall how it felt at the time?, etc. The offender in the role of the victim is encouraged to respond, and feel and say what they are experiencing which will often include a description of fear and powerlessness. Finally, they role reverse back to themselves as the offender. The offenderdrama is often now complete.

It is common at this stage for the protagonist to be crying and we will endorse this by saying such things as, "It's brave of you to show your feelings". The majority of the boys will cry at the end of the offenderdrama. We see this as a very important sign in the development of victim empathy as new roles emerge. For those that are not and are cut off from their feelings, we continue to work on victim empathy in follow-up groups and individual therapy. Kellerman (1992) argues that "though catharsis itself is an element of Psychodrama it is only curative if it is complemented by some cognitive insight" (p.85). In our work with adolescents we ensure that the crying release is associated with the realisation of how it must have been to be their victim and other cognitive aspects of the drama are reinforced in the sharing.

Sharing allows the adolescent who has completed his drama to reconnect to the group. Each boy is

encouraged to share their personal feelings and thoughts about the drama and the effects on their victim. Sharing increases the warm-up of the remaining adolescents to experiencing empathy for their victim when they subsequently do their offenderdrama.

## The Method in Action

Below is an example of an offenderdrama. In this drama, the initial stages in setting up the offenderdrama were of great significance to the success of the work done. We describe the ongoing warm-up that often occurs in the early stage of the drama and how this contributed to the depth of warm-up when role reversal is introduced.

We are all sitting on old couches in a group in an old wooden lodge under the watchful eye of Mt Ruapehu. Outside it is misty and occasionally it starts raining. The paint on the walls is faded and there is a pot belly wood burner at one end of the room. A number of the boys have completed their offenderdramas and I invite Mathew to step forward into the action space. Mathew has until recently been raping his younger sister for a number of years.

His parents have found it difficult to place responsibility squarely on Mathew's shoulders for what he has done. His mother has had an intense, close relationship with Mathew wanting to involve herself in all aspects of his life. His father, on the other hand, has been distant and emotionally removed from his son. I step forward and ask Mathew to come forward with me.

Director (Ian): *Tell me about your relationship with your father, what sort of man is he, what does he like doing...*

Mathew proceeds to talk about his relationship with his father and the fact that he hasn't been emotionally open with him. I then ask Mathew what that's been like for him and I notice that his physical stature changes and he starts to look awkward and tense.

Director: *I have an image of a crab in a shell and that your father retreats into his shell when things are too frightening in the world for him.*

Mathew nods and I explain that maybe he has picked up some of those qualities from his father. I emphasise that they are useful sometimes. I then ask Mathew what does he think might happen if he comes out of his shell when he does his drama. Mathew replies this will reduce the likelihood of him re-offending.

Director: *Have you ever drunk Tequila? Well, there's a type called Dos Gusanos and its got a worm in the bottom of it ..... I think that you've got a worm inside you ..... and that the more you don't talk about things, the longer it gets and that faster it burrows ..... I would guess that you've thought about killing yourself? The faster the worm burrows, the closer you get to doing it.*

Mathew watches knowingly, the metaphors for his father and his life have been meaningful for him. I then look around the room and my eye catches the wooden burner.

Director: *This might sound crazy ..... but I'd like you to imagine for this drama that the belly of the stove is your head.*

The director walks over to the stove and opens the door a fraction.

Director: *If you could imagine for a moment that the door represents how open you feel at the moment ..... would you please go over and open the door to the amount which you think represents how open you feel at the moment.*

Mathew walks over and opens the door approximately one quarter open. After which I ask him to open the door to a level that represents the degree to which he is prepared to be open in his drama. He proceeds to open it approximately three quarters open.

Director: *I think that's really brave of you ..... because now you're making a statement about the sort of person you want to become ....:*

Having set the context, the drama is now ready to begin. We then proceed to set up his social atom. He sets out his mother, father, older sister (Jane), the sister whom he abused (Sarah), and his younger brother (Sam) and young sister (Jo).

Director: *I'd like you to go around your family one by one and tell those most affected by your offending what you did to Sarah.*

Mathew: *Dad, I sexually abused Sarah ..... I raped her for three years.*

His father isn't facing him and he turns his head around when Mathew talks to him.

Director: *Reverse roles.*

Dad: *Ab... what...*

Director: *Reverse roles.*

Mathew: *I sexually abused Sarah.*

Director: *Reverse roles*

Dad: *(He does not say anything but looks at Mathew)*

Director: *Who's next?*

Mathew: *Mum... Mum, I've been raping Sarah for the past three years.*

Director: *Reverse roles.*  
Mum: *After all I've done for you...  
How could you! (Shouting)*  
Director: *Reverse roles.*  
Mathew: *Jane... I raped Sarah... I've  
been doing it for the past three  
years.*  
Director: *Reverse roles.*  
Jane: *You've messed up again... you  
fool. I'd expect something like this  
from you!*  
Director: *Reverse roles.*  
Mathew: *You smart bitch.*  
Director: *So this is how it is. This is  
what your family say to you.  
Choose someone to be Sarah and  
then reverse roles and be Sarah.*

The director then proceeds to interview Sarah in role asking questions such as: How old are you? What colour hair do you have? What things do you like doing? What colour clothes do you like wearing the most? Etc. Following this I ask Sarah to reverse roles.

Director: *I want you to tell Sarah in detail what you did to her.*  
Mathew: *I raped you for three years. It started off by touching your vagina and then this wasn't enough. I didn't care what you thought and didn't think it was doing you any harm. I thought you liked it.*  
Director: *Reverse roles.*  
Sarah: *Why did you do that ... I didn't want it to happen. Sometimes I used to shake while you were raping me.*

By this stage, the protagonist in the role of Sarah, is sobbing and has her hands on her head. There is a full catharsis, and the goal of the drama is achieved. I ask her to reverse roles back to Mathew. The drama can now be concluded. Mathew is still crying and the auxiliaries sit down. Through the process of sharing he is supported by the group and affirmed

for being open. Acknowledgment is also made of the distinction between what he has done today, the "old" Mathew, and the role of the "withdrawing hermit crab" that his father has well developed.

## Conclusion

We have described a brief part of our therapeutic program and of our application of psychodrama with adolescent sexual offenders. The psychodramas are sometimes longer and may involve extended family or other significant people in the adolescent's life. We believe that the use of psychodrama can facilitate change and research (Hickling 1992) would seem to support our belief. From a sample of 14 adolescents followed up two years post-treatment, eleven of the 14 cited the offenderdrama as the most useful part of the programme. 13 of the 14 stated it had increased their level of understanding of the effects of sexual abuse on their victims and 13 adolescents said they reported a perceived increase in a feeling of safety from re-offending, with the offenderdrama being the most often cited reason for this greater feeling of surety.

So we are continuing to evolve our use of action methods with the adolescents, enabling them to have an experience that allows them to start to understand the effects of their offending behaviours on their victims. This new ability to experience themselves as their victims reduces their likelihood of re-offending.

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