

Action Insight:

The Treatment of Adolescent Sexual Offenders

by Marlyn Robson

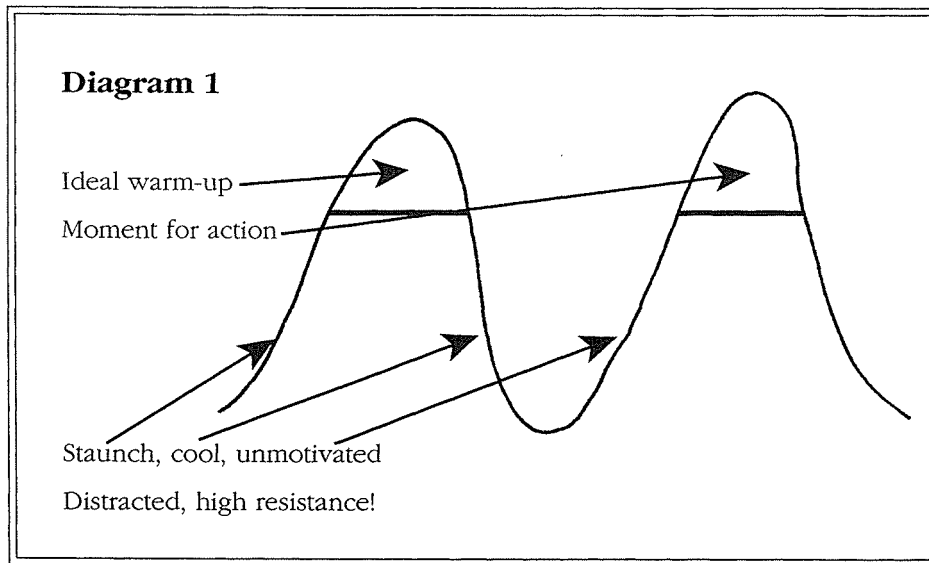
Marlyn is a group worker and family therapist who is working part-time in an agency for the treatment of sexual offenders. She is an advanced trainee in the Auckland Training Centre for Psychodrama. Her other professional interest is her work operating a private practice as a dentist.

I have been a psychodrama trainee for nine years, am currently in the peer group at the Auckland Training Centre, and have also been working with adolescent sexual offenders for six years. My particular interest has been the warm-up phase of the work, since this, in my experience, is often where a group becomes stodgy and stuck. How do you warm-up someone who is not motivated to be in a group, not motivated to change and is terminally staunch or cool; and how do you take them to the warmed-up moment where we can work without them spinning out into rage, hilarity, distraction or fragmentation?

The SAFE network is an agency in Auckland for the treatment of sexual offending behaviour in adults and adolescents. From its inception about seven years ago, and throughout its development, particularly in the adolescent programme, we as a team have incorporated psychodramatic methods into the

treatment programme. As psychodrama trainees, many of us know that people learn through doing, by using their bodies and experiencing their emotions as well as developing their thinking. Understanding that has been achieved through doing rather than thinking is likely to be expressed by change in action and behaviour.

Changing behaviour that is well developed and satisfies a need is very difficult, as alcohol and drug agencies, weight loss clinics, anti-smoking campaigns and stopping violence programmes will all attest to. Sexually offending behaviour is no exception. Most programmes around the world, including SAFE's, that treat sexual offenders are based on a cognitive behavioural model (CBT) to a greater or lesser extent. The belief is that if the clients gain insight and understanding of themselves and their difficulties, how they arose and how they can be changed, then they will choose to

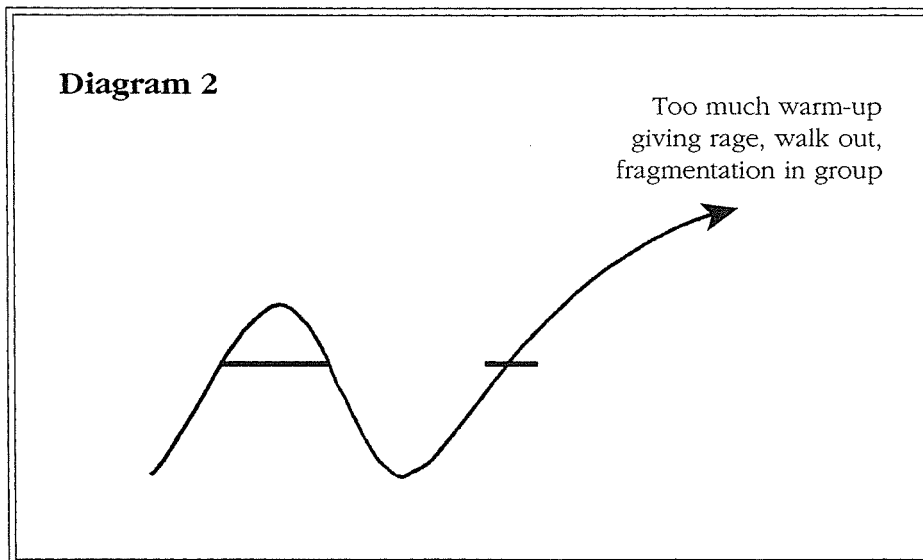


change (Bandura, 1997). Self understanding, however, does not automatically produce emotional or behavioural changes (Janov, 1970; Kohut, 1984; Yalom, 1975). Whittaker and Lieberman's theory is that there may be a wish for some reason to change, the disturbing motive, and also present will be the reactive fear to change. Both need to be acknowledged and explored for enabling solutions to be found. The cognitive behavioural concept is that what we think affects what we do so, if we change what we think, we will change what we do. However, sexual offenders, and probably other adolescents often undermine and sabotage such strategies because of feelings such as fear and shame and produce the restrictive solution of compliance but not real change. For therapy to be successful with this population, the process of self-discovery needs to include a catharsis of integration that touches all three areas – the emotional, cognitive, and action or doing levels of a person's expression in order for a truly new and creative solution to come about. Moreno describes the

process of self-discovery in psychodrama as *action insight*, and I find that psychodrama offers a powerful opportunity to change the old story, the old self-defeating patterns through the creation of new experiences.

Moreno proposed that an increase in spontaneity and creativity will bring about the formation of new roles. In the psychodrama work we do, we are indeed finding this to be so. As the spontaneity level rises in these boys, we can observe new roles developing that are positive and creative in their expression. As these roles begin to emerge then give a new found psychological strength to the boys, to work with their own traumas and that of others. Role theory presents to us that there is a thinking, action and feeling component to every role. This concept has encouraged me to use the experiential process of role play/vignette, which affects and effects change in all these areas.

As we know, in one form of spontaneity, spontaneity is expressed when there is a new response to an old situation. In Moreno's



spontaneity theory (1972) he says that “in the development of a person there can be original moments, truly creative and decisive beginnings” and these are exactly what we are looking for in our work to help change sexually offending behaviour. Moreno (1977) talks of spontaneity being creative, original, dramatic and having an adequacy of response. It is the engine that drives the creative act. When anxiety or resistance is high, as it often is in our groups, spontaneity is low. I work to increase the spontaneity present, which then allows adequate creative responses to emerge from our clients. Drama therapy games are particularly good as action warm-ups here, especially with adolescents. The boys are actively using their bodies, and their emotions are also stimulated bringing about a balance of action and feeling in their warming-up process. The fun involved assists a great deal to lower anxiety and facilitate an environment where trust can be reborn. The level of increased spontaneity will determine how they will react to new situations.

See Diagram 1 and Diagram 2.

Any game that gets them moving will increase warm-up, such as walking games, tag and fantasy or adventure journeys. There are endless games that can be used, but they will be more effective when used with a purpose. Some games warm-up their bodies, such as slalom, some games such as zip-zap-bop warm-up their minds and concentration, and other games warm-up their spontaneity such as speaking in funny voices or passing an object around such as a hearth brush, and each boy using it as a totally different object. The skill in making the game have value as a warming-up process is for the leaders to select and address a moment in the group to produce interaction.

Slalom is an example of a game which is very physical, requires a certain amount of thought, as well as stimulating quite intense emotions. It is a visualisation game where the boys stand all facing one way, an arm’s length apart, as slalom poles in a ski race. Then the end boy has a good look at where everyone is, tries

to keep the picture in his head as he is blindfolded and then using skiing movements, zigzags as fast as he can between the poles to the end. Everyone has a turn, and each boy gets something different out of it. Boy A has to totally trust the group to stay where he visualises them. This is a tremendous test for most of these boys who have learnt to never trust anyone about anything in life. Boy B has to stay in line and play fair, in life he has learnt to be one up and always one step ahead. Boy C cannot ever dare to be blindfolded and experience the powerlessness of that but will participate if he can choose to close his eyes – what power for him! Boy D is small and timid – can he legitimately bump into the others in the group and not get done over?

If the warm-up gets too high, fragmentation will start to occur, therefore constant assessment of the warm-up is needed by noticing voice levels, interruptions, body movements and general anxiety levels. Games can be introduced to slow the process down, help them to concentrate and to access self control. An old trust game of the small circle with one person in the middle with their eyes closed being moved around, can be useful here – if the instruction is to really care for this person, act as lovingly and gently as you'd like to be touched. There is no place for "bossy teach" here telling them to be quiet! A change of pace is necessary as in the game described or a game to make them laugh – perhaps speaking in gobbledegook. *There is something about being able to adjust the warm-up of the group – up or down – that allows the boys to trust the process of therapy more.*

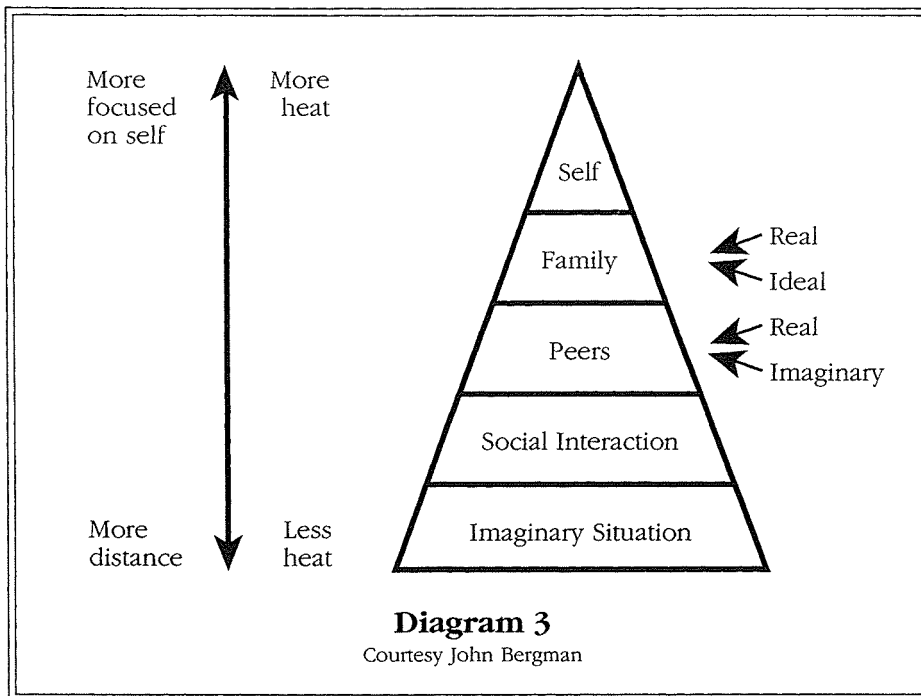
It is important for us to be clear that at SAFE we are very solution

focused and the aim here is to change sexually offending behaviour. We are aiming to help all the members of the group to gain insight and awareness into underlying and hidden attitudes and feelings, to complete delayed developmental processes and to look at problematical interpersonal relationships, but our particular business is to change sexually offending behaviour. Therefore, as facilitators or directors of the group, we have these two main areas of focus – to keep an educative focus, and a personal process focus.

The Structure and Character of the Weekly Group

The weekly group includes between 6-12 adolescents, a co-therapist and myself. The structure of the initial activities is quite simple, such as small concretisations of incidents they mention about everyday life, then the subjects are general rather than personal, and at this stage, there is no role reversal. Throughout the work we encourage awareness of their bodies and feelings. Sex offenders in particular, have difficulty in naming any other feeling than anger. A primary task is to discover the hidden feelings that are often masked by the expression of anger. Once again, the director has a task here to tune into the special needs of regulating the warm-up so that the intensity of the enactment is able to be tolerated by the participants.

In time, as trust increases, the concretisations become vignettes and then enactment's that will include the technique of role reversal. We choose moments of their life to enact at any given moment, either from a moment in the group warm-up or



from a director's decision at that given moment using the ideas in Diagram 3.

The needs of each boy for a different warm-up requires an easy, flexible and sensitive approach. One boy may only be able to tolerate a fantasy journey as an explorer through an enchanted forest, while another may have enough self esteem to enact a small psychodrama about a high risk situation in his every day life and his choices around that. These boys are hypersensitive to criticism, shame, embarrassment, exposure and being isolated, all of which may lead to humiliation and this again is where we need to be extra careful to regulate the warm-up, constantly making decisions about more heat or more distance as in the diagram. Working with the resistances in bringing the hidden world out into the public arena so that new solutions can be explored, is a constant and difficult work. What

are their private fears, of whom are they afraid, are they remembering their own abuse, are they plotting revenge, do they ache for love and someone to care about them? Here the use of masks and pictures and strange toys are wonderfully helpful as we work to make the hidden and shameful overt.

Setting out family relationships of the 'tele' relationships within their families, using sculptures, adds awareness of family dynamics beyond the family therapy sessions. The opportunity to experiment with expressing what could never be expressed in the family directly, can be explored safely within the play of a psychodrama. Boys can explore being hugely angry with an absent father or a violent father and say clearly that it is not good enough, a role that would not be safe to explore in real life.

The Relevance of the Double

The concept of the double is very helpful in this work. I have found the ideas developed by Kate Hudgins on the Containing Double to be of special value. These ideas have been a central part of her Therapeutic Spiral work with trauma survivors. Only about 30-40% of SAFE boys would be sexual abuse survivors but all are survivors of other traumas such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, and severe attachment deficits.

There are three strands in developing the Containing Double. The first is learning to reflect on the process or on what is happening in any given moment. This ability to observe is frequently absent in our boys. A common phrase is, "it just happened" – so becoming aware is incredibly important.

The second strand of development is learning what is involved in being able to express the containing statement e.g., "I'm okay; I can handle this," "I do have some skills," "I can do it," "I think I can even begin to look at what happens when."

The third strand to the development of the Containing Double is the anchor in the here and now e.g., awareness of changes in the body, and awareness of the possibility of change. It is a bit like having a strong accepting loving mother beside you that notices what is happening and totally believes in you.

The Containing Double is a very helpful role relationship for these offenders to develop so that they can be safe in facing their own trauma, and safe in facing their own aggressive impulses towards others.

Simple Role Theory: "Good Voice, Bad Voice, Hot Head, Cool Head"

The concept of roles that we introduce to the boys are in a very simple form. Most of this teaching is in the form of it is "good voice" or "bad voice", "hot head" or "cool head". We ask, "What does the good voice say in a high risk situation, what does the bad voice say?" We might also concretise what we call the "hiding place" that they go to in their heads in a stressful situation and what might the voices say from there.

Enquiry into the Social System

A sociodramatic approach is used to help these boys become aware of the influences upon them and of them on others, both in the group and within the larger culture. For example, a sociodramatic question might be, "How have they, as a group of sex offenders, affected their world?" The roles of the police, social workers, victim, victim's parents, grandparents, their own parents and grandparents, their teachers, their friends are set out on the stage. This sociodramatic enactment is often a very awakening and expanding .

I hope that I have conveyed something of the spirit of our work, especially that we as facilitators and participants in this programme, are enlivened by the intensity and activity of the psychodrama work. We are confident that the focus of touching the three areas of a role, the feeling, thinking and action levels is what effects real change, and lasts longest in the life of the participants of our programme. Although Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is the initial treatment

of choice around the world for the treatment of serious offenders, more and more treatment programmes are incorporating some forms of experiential therapy to help change behaviour.