Sociodrama with Juvenile Offenders

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This article focuses on the lead up to and the enactment of a sociodrama with juvenile offenders who have committed serious crimes. It highlights the need for flexibility in managing the group warm up, finding the appropriate structure and recognizing the underlying theme of the group. One clear conclusion is that keeping the sociodramatic question in mind is an effective way of grounding the learning for the participants.

They Won't Work On Their Personal Situations

In a secure room in a juvenile detention centre, five boys, aged between 12 and 16, and four adults - the unit psychologist, two youth workers and me as visiting director - are working in twos and threes. The large number of adults present is to prevent possible violence. This is the second of six voluntary 60 - 75 minute sessions. There is nothing breakable in the room, no sharp edges and the chairs are plastic. The walls are a grubby pastel green. There is nothing to tear, no posters, no carpet. Nothing comfortable. Nothing homely. There is a television set high in a corner. All doors, windows and peepholes are security locked at all times. All the adults, except me, have keys. The single external window overlooks some grass and a brick wall. Despite this, the mood is purposeful.

Psychodrama is one of a sequence of alternate therapies being trialled to see what might prove effective. I have been asked to work with the boys on the understanding that they are not able or not prepared to discuss their internal worlds. The preliminary briefing with the psychologist clearly indicated that the boys would get aggressive or just walk out if expected to enact their personal situations. I learn that their self-appointed leader and spokesperson is Nod, that all the boys are afraid of Steve and that they all aspire to be successful 'crims'. These boys are all from the unit for the emotionally disturbed. They have done some awful things that I am not told about as it is not directly relevant to the program.

"Russell would do it"

The previous program used drama therapy where the underlying purpose was to expand the boys' social empathy to include those who are were affected by their crimes. The centerpiece of the work was the scripting and acting out of a courtroom drama in costume. In a stroke of brilliance the drama therapist had

invited the boys to get involved because they would learn how to act. The boys were well aware that some crims had achieved notoriety and a career in film. In their sessions the boys accepted participating in warm ups when told that *"It's exactly what Russell Crowe would do before acting in a scene."*

Taking this warm up into account, I have thought carefully about how to present myself and the purpose of the sessions to the boys.

Session 1

For the first session I set up a circle of chairs. The boys file in, alert, curious, with some displaying defensive bravado. They are checking out the newcomer. I introduce myself and make a brief statement about our work, comparing it to playing the game of life. I say, *"I am the head coach in the game of life and I do this all the time for a living. You do not play the game very well or you wouldn't be here. As well, there is the game of surviving in jail because that is also your life now".*

I ask everyone to stand in a circle. All the adults participate but two boys sit watching from a corner. I begin the circle game 'Find the Leader' without instructions. This involves the group mirroring the movements of a designated leader. The person in the middle doesn't know who the leader is and has to figure out who is actually leading the gestures and movement in the group.

Director, *"Everyone stand like Steve is standing".* We all take up his posture.
Steve, immediately ... *"I don't like this"* ... looking around tensely.
Director, to everyone ... *"Do what Steve just did".*
Steve, *"Why are you copying me?"* ... more tense.
Director, *"Let's copy Jack (youth worker) now".*

I realise that I have begun the mirroring playfully and with good humour but without setting out the structure of the game. These boys need more

safety in order to play well. This is a classic example of spontaneity dissipating when there is no adequate structure. I explain the rules further and the game progresses more easily. I begin to feel more solid as the leader. The boys involved focus on enjoying the game.

A couple of turns later I link the game to our work.
Director, *"This is important because when you walk into a room and see things going on you need to work out who the leader is".*
Nod responds immediately.
Nod, *"I'm the leader".*
Director, *"Then the next thing is to learn how to pass the leadership over."*
Nod looks thoughtful

The boys must be feeling safer because at the next activity two more join in. Shortly afterwards one is removed for being disruptive. He has continually sniped at Nod to the point of upstaging him. Nod is cool about it as it reinforces his status. So the issue of power between the boys is present although unspoken.

The session closes with a good feeling in the room. I realise that the boys mainly want to be taken seriously and be treated with respect.

My experience of the first session taught me a lot. I know that the boys are not a unified group except in opposition to authority. Their level of trust and personal responsibility is low. A central theme of the group is focused on who has power and how it is exerted.

Session 2

A week later there are six boys and four adults in attendance. I have decided to work sociodramatically with the issue of power, setting out scenes that involve people like the participants.

After the warm up games, I use photos to focus the boys on what it means to be powerful [1]. They select and briefly speak about the photos they have chosen. Three of them co-operate in sorting these photos into themes and give them titles to name the kind of power that is represented.

We then move to a team tag game called 'Cat and Mouse'. This requires one team to select a controller who issues instructions to their blindfolded cat about how to catch the other team's blindfolded mouse. The controller of the second team meanwhile directs the mouse to escape. The game involves developing trust - trusting someone to keep you safe and tell you what to do when you cannot see - and the ability to cope with change. This activity thus involves the transfer of power between participants.

Both teams keep to the rules and a sense of childlike delight emerges, although no-one remarks upon this. The boys' ability to enter the role of trusting participant is limited, but they do respond positively when the controller roles are changed at short notice. One participant who has not spoken at all, and whose strategy is to get others to do his thinking for him, is suddenly given the task of controller and participates satisfactorily. I link this game to real life situations where we all need to know that we can trust others so that we can participate in the game of life.

Thus far we have focused on participation, trust and the experience of power. The group has warmed up to action, to thoughtfulness, to playfulness, to my leadership and to the idea that the games do mirror life in some way. It seems to me that the boys are not concerned with the purpose of the group, as long as they are not expected to play 'baby games'. After this game they are watchful and curious.

The Move to Action
I form the group into adult-adolescent pairs and

ask them to draw comparative pictures of 'a good youth worker and 'a bad youth worker'. The emphasis here is on a structured warm up with explicit instructions, as I realise that the boys do not have adequate roles for a discussion group. Safety is enhanced with strong structure.

This session is drawing more on the boys' life experience but from the safe distance of the social role of the youth worker. The boys have strong opinions about the youth workers who have power over their lives, and thus the issue of power is being carried forward into the sociodrama. I have inferred a sociodramatic question which I do not share with the group, as I consider my articulation overly conceptual. The sociodramatic question is *"How can we have a healthy relationship with power in a detention centre?"*

After completing the drawings, the participants sit in a semi circle and I announce that we are going to create a scene. Each group shares their thinking about the actions of a bad youth worker. I make an assessment of the sociometry in the group and choose the boy most likely to respond positively. Nod is the self-appointed leader and he is well warmed up to drama. I judge that his participation will be essential to involving the other boys in the group.

Director, *"What did you come up with Nod?"*
Nod, *"Runnin' boys into the lock up. Bang, whooshka ... really bad eh!"* ... looks gleefully around at others.

Setting out the System: Scene 1
Director, *"Let's set out where they are and what the bad youth worker does. You come out and be one of the youth workers. Set the scene. What's in front of you?"*
Nod, *"Metal door ... a concrete step you sort of trip over and the wall in front"*.

Director, *"Now pick someone to be another bad youth worker"*. Pat is chosen and comes out.
"OK, get someone to be the kid in trouble". Nod looks around. The other boys shake their heads. Nod, *"What about you Col?"* Col, the psychologist, comes out.

Unsurprisingly no-one wants to be the victim. This is too much like real life. The psychologist has the strongest relationship with the boys and will hold his ground without losing his temper. I ask Nod to select an auxiliary to play the role of another bad youth worker. Adolescents frequently become self-consciousness, isolated and resistant when a spotlight is trained on them. I thus get multiple auxiliaries to represent a single role.

Director, *"We are going to do this in slow motion so that nobody gets hurt"*.

Slow motion is a device to ensure the safety of the group. The potential for violence is present in the room. Firm direction helps contain it.

Director, *"Okay. Act out what happens"*.
The three auxiliaries slowly enact the throwing of a boy into the lock up. They trip him and run him into the step 'by accident'. A lot of energy in the scene, delight and laughter.

Director, *"Freeze there. Now, as the youth worker, what's the important thing here?"*
Nod as bad YW, *"This little bastard needs teaching a lesson. He's not going to learn any other way"*.
Pat as bad YW, *"Yeah"* ... big smile ... *"We'll show him who's boss"*.
Director, *"OK. Thanks. That's the first scene. You guys sit down for a while"*.

I end the first scene there. I realise I have made a mistake. The boys' refusal to take on the role of the victim has distracted me from the sociodramatic question. I need to link this scene

to our purpose by asking: *"What is the effect on this boy of this form of power? What is he learning about power?"* With Col in the role of victim, it would have been an opportune time to pose this question to the boys.

As I end the scene I am aware that the youth workers have not said anything yet. However, they are not my main concern even though they are an important influence in the boys' lives and can make or break much of the progress made. My purpose is to create a functioning group and to keep broadening the conversation through enactment. There is a sense in the room that something 'real' has been created. The boys are being taken seriously. This is positive.

The roles that have been enacted thus far are somewhat stereotypical. The boys have not personally involved themselves in the characters, although Nod's image of a bad youth worker is probably drawn from his experience. I note that playfulness, although still somewhat sadistic, is high, and cooperation and willingness to participate is good. I could introduce a new element here by setting up a panel of lawyers. I could bring the bad youth worker's own children onto the stage, or even the boy's parents. My instinct tells me that it will be better to stay with the boys' existing stories. Without further role development in the group, these scenes are likely to produce further stereotyped roles. I drop these possibilities and simply choose to bring the next scene onto the stage.

Scene 2
Director, *"Now let's see a good youth worker"*. Pat looks at Steve and points at him. Pat knows something might be on. *"What did you have Steve?"*
Steve, *"There was this youth worker lady who gave the guys head-jobs"* ...greasy grin ... *"Before I came"*.
Pol, YW, sharply ...*"You're in fantasyland"*.
Director, *"We're working on what you think a good*

youth worker is from your experience".
Steve   *"Oh ... OK" ...* thinks ...

This direction makes the warm up more directly personal to Steve and at the same time he is not required to put himself on stage.

Director, *"In your experience what does a good youth worker do?"*
Steve, takes breath, quietly to self ... *"I can do this"* ... to group ... *"I've got one ... it's about you Nod"* ... sees suspicious look from Nod ... *"It's a good one"* ... defensively.

This is unusual. The group becomes alert, interested. Steve has chosen to create a scene involving someone else in the group. It is no longer at arms length.

Director, *"OK. Set the scene. You be a typical good youth worker. Where are you?"*
Steve as good YW, *"I'm coming to work. I've got something for Nod".*
Director, *"Put something under your arm. Where's Nod?"*
Steve as good YW, *"In his room".*
Director, *"Set up the room over here".* Steve does so methodically. *"Now you be Nod. Are you sitting on the bed? At the desk with your head on your arms. What's going on Nod? Turn your head to the side and say what's happening".*
Steve as Nod, *"I feel pissed off and sorry. That computer program is stuffed and I can't get it working".*
Director, *"Now you pick someone to be Nod"* ...picks Pat ... *"and you become the good youth worker again. Pick up what you had under your arm and stand outside the door. Pat, you sit at the table like you saw. Go ahead youth worker. Do what you do".*
Steve as good YW, *"Hey there. I got something for ya".*
Director, *"Reverse roles".* Auxiliary enacts youth worker.
Steve as Nod, ... lifts head blearily ... *"What?"*

Director, *"Reverse roles".* Auxiliary enacts Nod.
Steve as good YW, *"A computer loaded with that program you wanted".*
Director, *"Reverse roles".* Pat as auxiliary refuses. *"Too much moving about".* He sits down.
Steve as Nod, ... turns his head away, feeling is heightened, mutters to himself ... *"How can I ever repay you?"* ... poignant silence.
Director, after a longish pause. *"Okay. Let's hold it there".*

This is a critical moment in the drama. Steve has taken up the role of scene creator very well. The concretisation has assisted him to warm up to the story he has in mind. Through role reversal he has warmed up to the experience of being treated with kindness.

Steve has warmed up to something in himself and he is probably surprised by this. This is also the first moment of deep feeling in the group and, although some may not have noticed it, I want to allow room for it. The warm up to the personal and to the social are running hand in hand. I know that this depth of feeling is not yet discussable. I do the next best thing and value the moment in an unhurried, warm silence. The group is not impatient to move on. Steve has time to gather himself. I know that the warm up to feeling is important to the psychologist. One of his goals is to assist Steve to build his capacity for empathy. Without engendering self-pity, the enactment has highlighted the deeply affecting nature of kindness. Steve is enacting a progressive role that can be normalized over time. Deep feeling, no matter how quickly covered up, is a part of sociodrama.

In retrospect, I realise that this key moment presented another opportunity to link the work back to the sociodramatic question. *"What effect does this use of power have on this boy? What is he learning about power in this scene?"*

As I pause the action, I am conscious that the session must end soon. Good time boundaries are part of the leadership contract. I move to a final scene where two systems are enacted. I aim to assist the boys to make meaningful sense of what they have created so far.

Looking At the System as a Whole
Director, *"Now let's have the bad youth workers back here with Col as the boy"*. They reassemble. *"Look over at the good youth worker. What do you reckon is happening there?"*
Nod as bad YW, *"Load of bullshit"*.
Pat as bad YW, *"Doesn't matter"*.
Director, *"Don't you like what he's doing?"*
Nod as bad YW, *"S'alright"*.
Director, *"Now you two go over there and be the good youth worker. Look back over here at what is happening to this boy. What do you have to say to these youth workers"*.
Nod as good YW, to director ... *"What can you say?"* ... thoughtful pause.

Both scenes are portrayed on stage. I am struck by the maturity of the role Nod takes up in accepting that there are times when nothing can be said. He is being himself as the youth worker. Pat, playing the role of the good youth worker, is unable to mirror Nod's thoughtfulness. It would be a significant spontaneity challenge for Pat to speak in role. I decide not to 'push the river' and instead make a systemic statement about the work, linking it back to real life. I am pressured by time and I trust that the experience has affected them. For the moment the group is focused and coherent. Role development is progressive. There will be another session next week. I want to value the progress made and wrap it up for now.

Closing
Director, *"Look around at the whole scene. Notice what we have created. Sometimes there is nothing you can say but it doesn't stop you doing what you*

can. Thank you. We'll stop there".

In a final scene such as this, I would normally let my curiosity loose and investigate how two opposing groups of youth workers co-exist, how it is that some workers belong in both groups and what effects this scenario has on the boys. However, I know that the boys must develop a stronger sense of self and be capable of personal reflection to address such questions. As well, they would need to have developed trust in me over time. Trust must be earned in a detention centre. We are not yet at this stage.

On reflection, I realise that it would have been more effective to link the boys' experience back to the sociodramatic question again. "What makes the difference between good and bad uses of power?" However, in the event there is no time to consciously integrate the work. The group moves directly into 'milk and milo' and we hang out for five minutes before I leave for the post-session debrief with the unit psychologist.

Conclusion
The boys are learning about the nature of power and how it shapes their responses to their own situations. The issue of power is always to the fore in a detention centre, and therefore a significant factor in my directorship of the group. I realise that a more conscious use of the sociodramatic question would have assisted the boys' learning. I do not expect them to analyse and intervene in their own social system. They do not yet have the personal and social roles to do this.

In the role of Nod, Steve experienced some 'action-insight' but I do not know how well he is able to learn from this experience. The boys, particularly Nod, took pleasure in depicting the 'bad youth workers' and warmed up to a greater level of spontaneity. Although this is their world,

they are not yet in a position to reconfigure their responses. This is, after all, why they are in detention.

I cannot be sure that the boys have a clearer picture of the social system in the detention center as a result of the enactments. But I do know that the focus on the value of kindness, shared by all the participants in the group, is new, even though it is not normally admitted. Kindness is a form of power. The group has been more playful and the enactments have engendered spontaneity. From my perspective, the most significant thing is the ongoing development of this group. Through the warm up and the sociodrama the boys, the attendant professionals and I have managed the power issues so that a workable group has emerged. We have been working on real issues from the boys' collective experience. Our next task is to build on this development.