

Doubling as a therapeutic response to childhood sexual trauma¹

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If we could produce for you the double of yourself, then you would have somebody with whom you could speak, with whom you could act together, because you belong together.

(J. L. Moreno, 1952, p. 273)

Attuned companionship from others early in life builds the foundation for a person's acceptance of their self as worthy, lovable and belonging. This self-acceptance assists a person to relate positively to others and to the world as a whole (Broom, 2008; Cooke, 2009; Dayton, 2005; O'Rourke, 2005). Conversely, a person's self-acceptance may be restricted or absent as a result of the lack of attunement from early caregivers, or diminished by traumatic events, including childhood sexual trauma [CST]. If this occurs, the spontaneity of a psychodramatic double may assist a person to warm up to self-acceptance, enabling them to connect with already-developed abilities, and to develop new progressive functioning (Dayton, 2005).

Effects of trauma

Trauma "at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources" (Briere & Scott, 2013, p. 8), leading to a sense of powerlessness and the emergence of fragmenting functioning. Trauma also produces "lasting psychological symptoms" (p. 8), which may include recurrent fragmenting functioning, along with the coping functioning a person draws on before, during and/or after a traumatic event. The terms fragmenting functioning and coping functioning are described below.²

¹ This article is a distillation of parts of my psychodrama thesis, "Applications of Doubling in the Integration of Childhood Sexual Trauma" (Reid, 2015). The full thesis is accessible from the AANZPA Members' webpage at <http://aanzpa.org/wp-content/uploads/theses/137.pdf>

² Based on Horney's (1945) infant-parent relationship research, Lynette Clayton (1982) develops a schema for comprehending a person's role functioning. She proposes three gestalts, namely, Pathological, Coping and Individuated. Max Clayton (1992) refines this schema and renames the gestalts Progressive,

Fragmenting functioning is characterized by pronounced hyper-arousal and high adrenaline fight-flight states of the brain-body system, or conversely by hypo-arousal and 'nil-adrenaline' freeze states (Parkinson, 1997, 2015; Porges, 2007). In both, access to the creative thinking and relational parts of the brain is disrupted. These responses may become entrenched over time and fragmentation may "become the central principle of personality organization" (Herman, 1997, p. 107).

Coping functioning comprises "habitual patterns that can be turned on at a moment's notice" (G. M. Clayton, 1993, p. 44). These patterns also involve the fight-flight circuits of the brain-body system, which when activated engage the sympathetic nervous system and increase arousal and adrenal levels. Coping responses, including placatory behavior toward the 'other' (Turner, 2002), are often an unconscious effort to reduce activation and associated anxiety and distress.

Fight-flight-placatory responses correlate with Karen Horney's (1945) observation of the coping strategies that infants utilize in response to a perceived threat, namely, 'moving away', 'moving against' or 'moving toward'. Frequently, a person will favor one or two of these strategies, however, developing the ability to use all three coping strategies increases role flexibility and self-confidence (Broom, 2008; L. Clayton, 1982).

A person may warm up to coping and/or fragmenting functioning at times when they perceive a threat that is similar in some way to an original trauma, whether or not the threat exists. This perception may be activated by external stimuli, such as noise, smell, taste or visual stimulus, or by internal stimuli, such as particular sensory experiences, emotional states or thoughts (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 2000).

The aim of therapeutic work is to develop a wider repertoire of coping functioning along with progressive functioning that is spontaneous, creative and enables a person to "express their unique purpose for being in this world" (L. Clayton, 1982, p. 112). Progressive functioning is characterized by optimal arousal, optimal adrenal activation, and activation of the social engagement and creative problem-solving parts of the brain-body system (Courtios & Ford, 2009; Ogden et al., 2006; Porges, 2007).

For people who have experienced trauma, progressive functioning is achieved by "the recovery of spontaneity [which] may be regarded as the

Coping and Fragmenting, which are the terms favored in this paper (also see: Mehrtens, 2008; Reekie, 2007; Thomson, 2014).

... essential goal for psychodramatic work" (Kellerman, 2000, p. 26). Spontaneity can shift a person's warm-up from either a hypo-arousal freeze state or a hyper-arousal chaotic state, to adequate adrenal activation (Parkinson, 1997, 2015). The particular trauma that is the focus of this paper is childhood sexual trauma and some of its effects are discussed briefly below.

Childhood sexual trauma

The experience of childhood sexual trauma [CST] may cause significant disruption to a child's development. The likelihood that trauma will remain unprocessed increases when a child has received inadequate attunement from significant others in the years before or after the CST. The child may have no one they can confide in or there may be no one who notices and investigates CST's effects. In this circumstance, the consequences frequently intrude into adulthood.

As CST is directly caused by another person's actions, it often produces an unconscious act-hunger for satisfactory completion of the role interaction with that person. This can lead to trauma-like conditions being reproduced repeatedly with people, objects or in contexts that elicit a similar internal response (Hale, 2012, 2015).

The psychodramatic technique of doubling can assist the successful completion of role interactions with those responsible for the abuse, as well as with those who may not have responded adequately before, during and/or after the abuse. Doubling is described in the following section.

Doubling

Doubling is a psychodramatic technique in which a person enters another person's life experience, as described by Max Clayton (2009):

It is a process in which one person identifies with another person's view of the universe, with their actions, and with their emotions and feelings. In that process, the double develops a two-way interaction with the other person that is in tune with the direction of the other person's being. Thus doubling is expressive of a relationship with every aspect of another person ... (p. 13)

A double constantly attunes to the presence and actions of the protagonist—the person they are doubling. They may act in unison with the protagonist, be a silent companion or put words and/or actions to what the protagonist is expressing implicitly. As the double's relationship with the protagonist strengthens, they might maximize what the protagonist is expressing, or give expression to what is being rejected or is absent or unknown.

J. L. Moreno (1946) likens the functioning of a double to the functioning of a mother who enters a state of co-being, co-experiencing and co-acting with her child. She acts adequately to meet her child's needs and "develops a clear picture of his [sic] needs and rhythms, so she can warm up to his requirements to help him to function adequately" (p. 59).

Doubling increases self-acceptance and stimulates spontaneity and creativity. When a protagonist enters the unknown and frightening territory of trauma processing, doubling can assist them to traverse from frozen or chaotic responses to curiosity and experimentation. As Max Clayton (2009) expresses, "a double unworried by an experience can have a powerful effect" (p. 20). When a double is tempted to hold back their expression for fear of getting it wrong or being unsuccessful in attuning to the protagonist's warm-up, it may assist them to remember that their best attempts to double have the potential to "stimulate a renewal of consciousness of the many abilities that have been developing over the whole course of life" (p. 17).

Phases of doubling

Zerka Toeman Moreno (Toeman, 1948) recognizes five phases of doubling as a developmental process for both the double and the protagonist. Each phase signals a greater level of attunement between them.

Phase One

The double gives themselves the "fullest possible receptivity by repeating the words ... and feelings ... of the [protagonist]" (p. 60). The double aligns with the protagonist and reveals things the protagonist is not able to express or is not aware of.

Phase Two

"The double systematically and consciously elaborates the feelings ... by multiplying the intensity or their quantity" (p. 60). This is intended to expand these expressions in the protagonist or to provoke them to halt the double's expressions.

Phase Three

The double "becomes highly directive and bold in remarks and action. The [protagonist] may show considerable aggression and resentment and produce counter aggression in which the double immediately joins with a permissive and cooperative attitude" (pp. 60-61), thereby provoking self-confrontation followed by self-confirmation.

Phase Four

The double anticipates “the [protagonist’s] actions in the future – what he [sic] will do tomorrow” (p. 61).

Phase Five

This deepest and rarest phase occurs when “the [protagonist] loses the feeling that the double is another ... the threshold between them is gone; [... the protagonist] and the double are one” (p. 61).

Variables, such as the context and purpose of the work, the strength of the doubling relationship, the protagonist’s role development and motivation, and the double’s ability to attune, will each affect which phase is evident at any time during a piece of work.

Doubling as a therapeutic response to childhood sexual trauma

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. (Herman, 1997, p. 96)

Therapeutic interventions with adults who have experienced CST commonly focus on three areas: stabilization, trauma event processing, and social integration (Briere & Scott, 2013; Herman, 1997). Understanding what is required in each of these areas aids the efficacy of a double’s responses:

- Stabilization: Reducing fragmentation and increasing a protagonist’s capacity to relate with others.
- Trauma Event Processing: Role development in response to fragmenting and coping functioning associated with CST, either in the context of CST events¹ or other past, present or future situations.
- Social Integration: Addressing experiences of shame, guilt, helplessness, anxiety, repressed emotions or other responses to CST.

Which area is worked on depends on the protagonist’s role repertoire and their tolerance for warming up to trauma experience. Doubling can contribute to a protagonist’s capacity to stay within their optimal warm-up range—their ‘window of tolerance’ (Van der Kolk, 1996)—and over time may reduce the frequency, duration and intensity of coping and fragmenting functioning. Balancing doubling responses with the protagonist’s readiness is key.

¹ Doubling at the site of CST is counter-indicated until adequate roles are developed to support this (Cossa, 2006).

The double's attunement to the protagonist's experience of physical and psychological distance is important (Cossa, 2006; Z. T. Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000). Closeness may be experienced as a violation of personal 'space', while paradoxically it may be wanted. Distance may be preferred on the one hand, yet is unbearable on the other. The protagonist must be free to disagree with and modify their double's responses and when this occurs, flexibility and self-stability on the part of the double is invaluable (Blatner, 1996).

Doubling can assist the integration of CST memories that have been cocooned from consciousness or those that may repeatedly break through into the present. The process of consciously integrating these memories may involve a protagonist experiencing extreme distress, such as murderous rage, profound helplessness, or deep grief. The double must be willing and able to warm up to these states with their protagonist.

Excerpts of doubling adults who have experienced childhood sexual trauma

The two excerpts presented below display my doubling of adults who have experienced CST.¹ My work with Steve is drawn from my psychotherapy practice; while with Penny, I am her auxiliary in a psychodrama group led by another psychodramatist.²

Doubling Steve

During our first one-to-one session, Steve sits on the edge of his seat staring at the floor and occasionally glancing around the room while his right knee shakes rapidly up and down. He speaks quickly in short sentences, describing his 18-year-old niece's sudden move out of his home, cutting off all contact with him. He can't understand how she could cast him off after all he has done for her. Matching Steve's posture and voice tone, I double him.

Double: It's hard to understand what would make her do that. Just move out and cut off connection when she's had so much support.

Steve: Just 'cos she's got somewhere else to go, she's just up and left without giving a @#* about me or my daughter.

Double: She just abandons ship without any care of the distress it's causing. It's painful.

Steve: Yeah, it is painful [pause]. Really painful. I just wish I could

¹ Further examples are presented in Reid (2015).

² Protagonist names and details have been changed to protect their identity.

make her answer my texts and calls. I can't bear it that she's just gone.

Double: It's hard to know which is worse, the distress of her having left or the frustration that there's no way to make her be in contact.

Steve: [Audibly breathing out and leaning back] Yeah, it's just a big bummer. After she left, I tried to end it all.

Commentary

In the description above, Steve is initially absorbed in his own experience with limited awareness of his feelings, let alone consciousness that I am separate from him. I start attuning to Steve by duplicating his posture, voice tone and somatic responses. Following Zerka T. Moreno's (Toeman, 1948) guidance, I open up to being fully receptive to experiencing life as Steve. This assists me to warm up and tentatively put words to his feelings. I trust that if I am not accurate enough, he will correct me.

When Steve accepts my doubling, he is no longer alone in his experience. His anxiety decreases and his spontaneity increases. This is apparent when his body tone improves, his knee stops shaking, his voice changes pitch, he sits further back on his chair, and his movements and speech become more flowing.

Steve and I are at the beginning of building a two-way relationship that may assist him to become consciously and positively aware of his own existence. Society is built on two-way relationships, and Steve and I are beginning to create society in his life (Toeman, 1948).

Doubling Penny

Penny is well known to me and is the protagonist in a current day drama with her father and mother. She sits hunched over and is silent as her father berates her about what she doesn't know, how she makes things up, and that she just needs to butt out. Penny squeezes her fists tightly. She clamps her lips together and breathes shallowly. I take up her posture as her double.

As her father continues, I feel a fiery rage in my body and spontaneously stand up and shout at him, "How dare you talk to me like that! You have no right to shut me up!" Penny's father hesitates and then continues berating her. I say to Penny, "Do I have to put up with this? Do I have to let him carry on like this? Or am I going to tell him the truth?" A moment later Penny stands up, facing her father. I move to stand beside her. She holds her fisted arm up towards him and says loudly, "That's true. You don't get to talk to me like that anymore, ever again. It's over!"

Commentary

Although Penny's father was not the person who sexually violated her, in the current role relationship with him she warms up to the powerlessness she experienced both during a sexual violation by her uncle and in response to her family's disregard for its effects. As her double, I experience and express intense anger, and I am aware of a suspended moment of exposure before Penny responds. My actions appear to warm Penny up to expressing herself directly and congruently to her father and when she does, I attune to her new warm up. This demonstrates aspects of the second and third phases of doubling (Toeman, 1948).

This enactment indicates a shift from a moderate hypo-arousal freeze state to adrenal activation, and this role development will support Penny to reject other abusive behaviours in the future. Concurrently, it is likely to alter her relationship with the CST and her uncle, and with anyone else who functions in ways reminiscent of either (Hale, 2012).

Implications for doubling adults who have experienced childhood sexual trauma

From my experience of doubling in therapeutic work with adults who have experienced CST, the following implications have emerged:

1. Doubling may mitigate disruptions to personality development caused or exacerbated by CST and its aftermath.
2. A double's willingness and ability to enter a protagonist's experience, no matter how briefly may significantly deepen therapeutic work and foster a protagonist's acceptance of self.
3. Doubling provides a protagonist with a voice instead of silence, outward actions instead of immobility, and companionship instead of isolation. These new responses, which were unable to be fully enacted during or after the CST, may now bring the CST-related interactions to an enabling conclusion. This may increase the protagonist's ability to produce adequate responses where previously they have been overwhelmed.
4. Doubling assists the differentiation of past from present and enables CST experiences to be integrated with new and coherent meanings.
5. It is counter-indicated to attempt trauma event processing until stabilization is established and necessary roles developed.
6. To avoid replicating a sense of violation, it is important for a double to attune to the protagonist's experience of physical and psychological distance.

7. Practitioners who double those who have experienced CST may experience vicarious trauma themselves (Burge, 1997; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009; Remer, 2000) and the provision of adequate self-development, supervision, collegial support and self-care are important adjuncts to this work.

Conclusion

Doubling promotes the ability to enter unknown waters and to come to the shores of role creation. Through the experience of being doubled, a person may develop their self-acceptance and spontaneity and reconnect with abilities that have been suppressed or lost. For people who have experienced CST, doubling can bridge the chasm from isolation to relatedness.

My companioning of people who have experienced CST is a privilege that has both strengthened and enriched me. Through this work, I have developed a wider view of life, a deeper understanding of human development, and an increased acceptance of myself and others.

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