

Psychotherapist in Search of a Psychodrama Stage

PROJECTION SPACES AS ACTION STAGES

NEIL HUCKER

ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates six mental projection spaces of the mind (Hucker, 2006) that can be viewed as psychodramatic action stages, upon which the content of the imagination can be projected, differentially concretised and modifications of the psychodrama method applied. The application of these projection spaces will be illustrated via the description of an individual psychotherapy session. In this session, the mental projection spaces are worked with *as if* the therapy was being enacted psychodramatically on a psychodrama stage.

KEY WORDS

action stage, imagination, individual psychotherapy, projection, projection space, psychodrama

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. . .*

William Shakespeare
As You Like It Act 2, Scene 7

Introduction

J.L. Moreno (1977) pioneered the use of group therapy as an extension of individual psychotherapy. As well, he included a person's actions as an important component of the therapy process. The inclusion of action led to the development of dramatic interactive role playing on a stage, the psychodrama. In a psychodrama session, group members acting as auxiliary egos act out the roles of significant others in simulated and created scenes.

In my psychotherapeutic work as a psychiatrist, I predominantly work with people in individual psychotherapy. This individual psychotherapeutic work contrasts with my psychodrama training. This mainly took place in groups, where I learnt how to direct psychodramatic group therapy. My experience of the valuable outcomes created by applying the psychodramatic method in training groups and therapy groups has continually warmed me up to explore the applications of its principles in individual psychotherapy.

In a group psychodrama, auxiliaries can create with the protagonist such an involved interaction that the 'as-if' surplus reality merges with objective reality (Moreno & Moreno, 1975:10). For example, an auxiliary who is role playing a mother is related to by the protagonist as if she is the real mother in the here and now moment. As there are no group members in individual therapy settings to enact a person's projections, the therapist can play auxiliary roles. A closer approximation of a group psychodrama can then be produced. In individual sessions, even without the benefit of auxiliaries, I am always amazed by how realistic and involved the interaction seems to be between a protagonist and an imagined other person in an empty chair. Even without role reversal, a very involved meaningful encounter can be experienced with a projected, non-concretised imaginary other person.

My psychotherapy experience over the years eventually led me, in one epiphanous spontaneous moment, to view the process of a psychodrama session as progressing through a number of mental projection spaces - the private projection space of the mind, the shared communication space, the receiver's private communication space, the empty space, the concretised space and the role reversal space (Hucker, 2006). This new paradigm led me to think that if a person can engage with the imagery of a remembered scene out in the empty space of the psychodrama stage, before any enacted role reversal happens, then any space that a scene can be imagined in can be viewed as a psychodrama stage.

To test the hypothesis that the psychodrama method could be applied in any of these mental projection spaces, I applied it in the subjective, private imagination of the mind. The results of this work (Hucker, 2006) indicated that the psychodrama method could be adapted and utilised even in this most non-concrete of mental projection spaces. An 'imaginary psychodrama' could be produced. Three criteria were used to assess whether the application on this 'other' stage was psychodramatic - a high level of involvement in the interactive experience, the warm up to a spontaneity state and the creation of progressive role development.

I have undertaken further work to explore how the psychodrama method can be applied in the other mental projection spaces. I will describe the six spaces and discuss

how, if seen as psychodrama stages, modifications of the psychodramatic method can be applied. I will then describe and discuss a particular individual psychotherapy session wherein these six mental projection spaces were utilised.

The Projection Spaces

As discussed above, there are six identifiable mental projection spaces that a protagonist progresses through during a group psychodrama session. For the purposes of this paper, I am using the term projection to denote the process whereby a person's experience is transformed and put into a representational form (Hucker, 2006). For example, when a memory of a past scene emerges as a visual image in the imagination it can then be put into another representational form such as verbal language. The six mental projection spaces are as follows.

1. The Private Projection Space of the Mind

This space is entered into when a person is asked to bring to mind a remembered scene, to experience it, but not to describe its contents out aloud. The director will usually say "Bring to mind a scene where this theme occurred". Commonly, this remembered imagery is held within the boundaries of the head and the physical body but depending on the warm up, the space may extend out into the area surrounding the body. This imagined scene could be thought of as the first concretised representation of the protagonist's experience.

2. The Shared Communication Space

This space is used when the imagery of a remembered scene is converted into verbal and nonverbal language and communicated through role behaviour to the listening receiver. Within this space, the experience of the describer is transferred and then begins to be internalised, transformed and responded to by the receiver. This experience can occur in both the individual and the group psychodrama setting.

In this space, the language and role behaviour become the second concretisation of the remembered scene. The transmission of one person's experience over the telephone to another is a purer example of verbal language concretisation in this space.

3. The Receiver's Private Imagination Space

As a person describes to another their remembered experience and imagery, the receiver creates a mirror image in their own private imagination space. When a group member describes a remembered scene to other group members, who then interact to seek clarity, this space is emerging and being entered into. Within their own private imagination space, the receiver will also be reacting to the image they are creating. The more the describer projects the remembered imagery into language, and the receiver and describer mirror and double one another through language and role behaviour, the greater the potential for congruence in the two images and experiences.

4. The Empty Space

This space is defined as any area outside the physical body unoccupied by a physical object. The psychodrama stage upon which anything can be imagined is an example of this empty space. Here the director asks the protagonist to look out into the stage space and imagine the remembered scene. With an adequate warm up, the protagonist will begin to perceive this empty space as filled with the projected mental imagery. The physical eye and the mind's eye will dance together to produce in this physically empty space the surplus reality magic that can be produced and experienced on the psychodrama stage. Everything that is projected as a remembered scene is itself a surplus reality that the director and the protagonist imagine on the stage. The person's verbal description and the visual imagery projected and perceived out on the stage, are the concretisations of experience in this space.

5. The Concretised Space

In psychodrama group therapy, the term concretisation usually refers to the use of concrete representational objects with which a protagonist interacts. This space has been entered once objects or group members are used to concretise or personify the imagined scene out on the psychodrama stage, and the protagonist has warmed up to experiencing and interacting with them. In this space, the protagonist experiences the auxiliary or an object as the imagined other and relates to them before any role taking or role reversal occurs. The auxiliary or object become the screen upon which the remembered images are projected, and this continues the warm up to surplus reality. The protagonist's warm up is thus deepened through sensing and physically engaging with this concrete person or physical object.

6. The Role Reversal Space

It is in this space that role reversal, one of Moreno's central predictions for personal and social health, finds its fullest expression. "The protagonist must learn to take the role of all those with whom he is meaningfully related, to experience those persons in his social atom, their relationship to him and to one another" (Moreno & Moreno, 1975:238).

Interaction and role reversal with every relevant thing and person in a produced scene is central to the intense involvement in a psychodrama. This creates for the protagonist the experienced reality in the surplus reality. Moreno's psychodrama method was developed to produce and work with these two realities. "But there is a theatre in which reality or being is proven through illusion, one which restores the original unity between the two meta-zones through a process of humorous self reflection; in the therapeutic theatre reality and illusion are one" (Moreno, 1977:27). The use of auxiliaries maximises this interactive engagement so that the protagonist experiences the replaying of a remembered scene in a new, fresh and spontaneous way.

As stated in the 'Technique of Self Presentation' (Moreno, 1977:184), the protagonist can take up the roles of himself and the imagined others in the remembered scene he describes. In a group psychodrama an auxiliary can occupy the empty space where the protagonist has placed and/or played out the imagined other. A series of role reversing

interactions warms up the protagonist and auxiliaries to a specific role relationship experience. As the relevant systemic sociometric interactions emerge, the Canon of Creativity (Moreno, 1978:46) unfolds. There is a shift into a surplus reality encounter that enables social atom repair and creative role development.

In this role reversal projection space, the protagonist projects an image of another into the empty space of the psychodrama stage. The director then assists the protagonist to embody and take on the role of the projected image. Initially the protagonist experiences themselves in the shoes of the other, and then gradually comes to experience the role of the imagined other and 'being the other' in their shoes. The protagonist's internal remembered experience is thus projected, concretised and replayed in maximised surplus reality. It is this role reversal that ensures that all the projections are fully embodied, personalised and experienced (Moreno, 1978:85).

These six mental projection spaces, to a variable degree, are all progressed through, re-used and creatively combined in any full psychodramatic production.

Group Psychodrama Principles

There are some general principles in the production of a group psychodrama session that would need to be approximated in an individual psychotherapy session to say it was being dealt with psychodramatically. During a psychodrama session the director as producer, systems analyst and clinician aims to create for the group a sequence of warm up, enactment, integration and sharing (Blatner, 1973; Clayton, 1991; Hollander, 1978; Moreno, 1977). To highlight some of these principles, a brief description of a generic group psychodrama session is presented. It is taken from a remembered social relationship scene.

A protagonist emerges from the warm up phase, ideally with a concern that is representative of the central theme of the group. The director - producer then undertakes a more detailed interview with the protagonist to increase the warm up to an agreed upon focus and purpose for the psychodramatic work. The protagonist is then invited to imagine a beginning scene relevant to the concern, and to project it out onto the empty space of the psychodrama stage.

The director, with the aid of auxiliary group members and the full range of psychodramatic techniques, warms the protagonist up to engage with the imagined people in the scene on the stage. A maximised replaying of remembered scenes is produced. The protagonist warms up to a spontaneity state where a new, adequate response is created to deal with the conserved, problematic role relationship encapsulated in the original concern (Moreno, 1978:42). During the enactment phase a catharsis of abreaction and integration is achieved, as well as a testing of the new role response. In the final phase, all of the group members are invited to share their personal experiences of the session with the protagonist. The particular work and stage of the group process will influence the content of following sessions.

In individual psychotherapy sessions, I apply these psychodramatic principles using

the six projection spaces. To illustrate, I will present a modified version of a recent session. The description has been modified to respect confidentiality, and the protagonist renamed as Sue.

Application of the Projection Spaces in an Individual Psychotherapy Session

This particular session was one of a series that I conducted with Sue, a middle aged woman whom I was seeing in brief individual therapy. Her concerns focused on her ability to be free to decide her own future.

The Private Projection Space of the Mind

At the start of the session, Sue tells me that she has recently purchased a new property in the country. Her decision to do this is very important to her, but she puzzles over why this is the case. After some discussion, we agree to psychotherapeutically explore her reasoning. I suggest that, for a few minutes, she picture the property in her mind in silence. Her eyes defocus and she appears absorbed in her thoughts. I then suggest that she imagines walking over the property, and experiencing what she is thinking and feeling as she explores it. Again her eyes defocus and she appears internally absorbed. After some minutes I ask her to describe what is happening.

The Shared Communication Space

Sue describes her recent visit to the property with ease, its many loved features, the clean up that she envisages, and her satisfaction with the positive tele she experienced while interviewing a prospective landscape gardener. As a naïve inquirer, I ask many questions. Sue warms up to providing a very detailed description of her property, those things that she likes and dislikes, and those that she wants to change. I mirror back her words, feelings and plans, and I maximise the joy and excitement that she is experiencing.

The Receiver's Private Imagination Space

As the session proceeds I am observing Sue in the here and now as she describes the scene, as well as seeing with my mind's eye an expanding video picture of her property and her walk around it. At a particular point, she is actively talking to me and maintaining intense eye contact. Her passionate delight in her property is palpable. I am enjoying the tour myself and I am wondering where she will go next. I spontaneously make a doubling comment. "It seems important to you that you are able to freely enjoy this place". Immediately she experiences a profound catharsis and cries. She is surprised and says repeatedly "Where is this coming from?" I respond "I am not sure". As her weeping subsides, I notice that she is staring at the floor in front of her and to my left side. I inquire "What are you looking at Sue?"

The Empty Space

Sue looks at the floor in front of her and says that she is seeing a flowerbed at the new

property. She describes all the beautiful flowers that she can see and smell. She starts to weep softly in a longing kind of way, as though she is regaining something important that has been lost. I imagine the flowerbed there in front of her and ask "What does it bring to mind?" She suddenly sits up and begins to describe a beautiful garden out in the country, where she used to play when she was very little. She explains how happy she was playing in that garden on her own, while her parents worked nearby on their farm.

At this point Sue appears to be experiencing the remembered scene within her internal private space and the empty space, as if she is there. Because she is fully warmed up to experiencing her memory and sharing it, I decide that it is not necessary to concretise and enact the scene. Sue weeps again, remembering how her parents had sent her away at the age of five to a church home for five weeks because bush fires were threatening their property. She cannot remember the church home, but she does remember the lack of contact with her parents whilst there. Things were different when she returned home, and she did not feel close to her parents again. Some years later she and her family left the area.

The Role Reversal Space

I ask Sue to describe her parents, what they were like, how they responded to her, and what she imagined their experience was of the fire and sending her away. As she warms up to imagining their experience, she starts to speak more warmly about them. She sees that, like them, she probably would have taken similar action in the same circumstances. However, she also expresses her anger at them for not staying in contact with her. She lists other actions they might have taken, had they considered her feelings more adequately.

Eventually she becomes calm. I say "I wonder if the importance of your new property and garden is about you reclaiming your lost garden and lost happiness?" She laughs and agrees, and then silently contemplates the space where she had envisaged her new garden. I silently wait until she re-engages with me. I then suggest she bring herself back into the here and now room. I comment on the importance of coming out of the imaginary reality of the empty psychodrama space, and letting the projected scenes be taken back into self, into the internal private space.

As we sit facing one another I share with her a story from my childhood - how I played cowboys and Indians in the backyard. I realise that the size differential of little-me in the backyard was probably not that different to grownup-me, playing around on a property I had bought as an adult.

It is time to finish the session. Sue, now fully back in the real here and now, expresses her amazement at what has taken place, at what she has experienced. She leaves the session, expressing her impatience to return to her new property.

Discussion

The discussion will focus on the following three areas - the projection spaces, concretisation and action versus non-action spontaneity.

The Projection Spaces

Each of the projection spaces highlighted in the illustrative session can be used to produce a complete piece of psychotherapeutic work. These spaces can be seen as different action stages within which the whole curve of the psychodramatic process can be simulated. They are used as part of the warm up sequence in a fully enacted group psychodrama session. Each moment in a psychodramatic sequence is a warm up to the next moment.

Throughout a psychodrama session the director continually makes intervention choices based on the negotiated contract with the protagonist, and the particular warm up that emerges in any moment. In the session described above, the protagonist warmed up quickly to the remembered scene. She saw the garden in front of her. An almost immediate catharsis of abreaction occurred, indicating the significance of the new garden for her. At this time she did not know the connection between the scene, her feelings and our purpose, and nor did I.

I decided not to move from warm up to enactment, which would have taken the production out onto the action stage. Instead I chose to continue in the shared communication space and the empty space. My reasoning was focused on time constraints and the fact that no prior agreement had been reached regarding the use of role play action. Nevertheless, I continued to facilitate the warm up *as if* I was directing a classical psychodrama.

The protagonist then spontaneously visualised the next remembered scene. She described her experience as it emerged. This situation is similar to the use of the aside, the self-mirror position and multiple self-doubling in a group psychodrama. The protagonist steps aside from a direct interaction and progresses with verbal sharing.

I was able to bring my psychodrama experience to bear on the work because I was viewing all the projection spaces in this session as mental and physical action stages.

Concretisation

Through my view of these mental projection spaces as psychodramatic action stages, I have been motivated to expand the use of the term concretisation. In general, concretisation means the production of an experience in a form that can be engaged with physically by the self and others. An auxiliary interacting with a protagonist from the role of a remembered other is a standard form of concretisation. Rather than thinking of it as this kind of transformation of an experience or role into a physical form, I see it increasingly as the conversion of experience into something more definite in all the projection spaces. When a personal experience, such as a memory, becomes represented in any form that can be sensed, it can be said to be concretised.

For example, in the individual psychotherapy session the protagonist remained in the spaces where she was remembering, re-experiencing, describing and expressing herself. It was with these definite experienced forms that she and I engaged and interacted. I use the term engagement as well as interaction to make a distinction between a psychodramatically imagined scene and a psychodramatically enacted scene. The six

projection spaces can be worked with in a much fuller psychodramatic way when the concept of concretisation is thought of in this way.

Action Versus Non-Action Spontaneity

Finally, I would like to comment on how action insight relates to these other spaces. Moreno stated that the production of “action insight” through “acting from within, or acting out” is a necessary phase in a psychodrama (Moreno, 1977:x). I use action insight as my benchmark for the optimum spontaneity and role development created within a group psychodrama. However created though, a thoughtful insight is a major component of a spontaneous creative moment. In the illustrative session, there was a rapid progression from the first scene to the catharsis related to the remembered childhood scenes. Here, the protagonist was struck by the probable (one can never really know exactly) origins of her feelings of sadness and her act hunger for a return to the secure joy of the bush and garden.

In the session, the protagonist was able to mentally travel between the here and now in the therapy room where she was imagining herself at the new property, and a non-enacted state of surplus reality where she experienced her joyful and painful childhood memories. The importance of the early separation became apparent to her, and through experiencing her sadness, anger and joy she was able to thoughtfully reverse roles with her parents. This led to genuine social atom repair. The action centred on entering into the experience of the remembered and wished for roles, as if it was actually being enacted. The cognitive insight was achieved by discovering a meaningful connection between the past and the present, through intense experience in the here and now.

I brought many years of clinical doubling and mirroring experience, plus my own personal experiences, to create a spontaneous, integrative intervention. The protagonist had answered her original question quite adequately by the end of the session. She will need to practise the progressive role development and integration achieved in the session, out in action in the world. The role test indicates how adequately the desired role development is being achieved. Is the person doing things differently, both mentally and physically, in their day to day life? Has their role repertoire changed and progressed?

Concluding Remarks

The work described in this paper is part of an ongoing creative journey of mine. It is particularly related to practising individual psychotherapy. More generally though, a major inspiration for the work is to bring greater spontaneity to the ways that the psychodrama method can be applied and adapted in the many places in which we live and experience ourselves.

REFERENCES

- Blatner, H.A. (1973). *Acting-In*. Springer Publishing Company, New York.
- Clayton, G. M. (1991). *Directing Psychodrama: A Training Companion*. ICA Press, Melbourne.
- Hollander, C. E. (1978). *The Process for Psychodrama Training: The Hollander Psychodrama Curve*. Monograph. Snow Lion Press, Denver, Colorado.
- Hucker, N.E. (2006). *Psychodrama through the Mind's Eye*. ANZPA Psychodrama Certification Thesis.
- Moreno, J.L. (1934, 1953, 1978). *Who Shall Survive?* Beacon House, Beacon, New York.
- Moreno, J.L. (1977). *Psychodrama First Volume* (4th edition). Beacon House, Beacon, New York.
- Moreno, J.L. & Moreno, Z.T. (1975). *Psychodrama Third Volume: Action Therapy & Principles of Practice*. Beacon House, Beacon, New York.
- Shakespeare, W. (1980). As You Like It in Wilson, J.D. (ed.) *The Complete Works Of William Shakespeare* (pp139-142). Cambridge University Press and Octopus Books, London.



Neil Hucker (MBBS, FRANZCP) is a Consultant Psychiatrist and Psychodramatist working in private practice in Melbourne. He can be contacted at eddy1@labyrinth.net.au