

Through a Glass Darkly

COMING FACE TO FACE WITH MIRRORING IN PSYCHODRAMA

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ABSTRACT

Mirroring is a central element in psychodrama but the term is used in variable ways in different contexts. In this article, Tim Mapel investigates these various meanings. He focuses first on the historical development of the mirror concept in the writings of J.L. and Zerka Moreno, both as a therapeutic technique and as a stage of human development. Later writings, particularly contributions by Dr. Max Clayton, are then considered followed by a discussion of the contemporary uses of mirroring in psychodramatic production. What emerges is greater clarity regarding the concept and technique of mirroring.

KEY WORDS

J.L. and Zerka Moreno, Max Clayton, mirroring, mirror stage of human development, mirror technique, psychodrama

*For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face:
now I know in part;
but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

I Corinthians 13

Introduction

I remember being introduced to mirroring at my first psychodrama session. We were asked to pair up and simply mirror our partner's body posture, movements and non-verbal gestures. I became aware of being highly tuned in to my partner, carefully and attentively noticing them. And in turn I noticed I became much more aware of my own body, thoughts and feelings as my partner sensitively reflected what they saw in me. Mirroring seemed such a simple and powerful way to align myself with the experience of another and deepen self-awareness. Later in my psychodrama training, mirroring was used in another way. The director would

pause the action to allow the protagonist the opportunity to see themselves as others saw them through auxiliaries mirroring their thoughts, feelings and actions. These mirroring experiences were powerful in raising awareness in the protagonist and often led them to develop new and spontaneous responses to old situations as they re-entered their drama. They were also satisfying pieces of auxiliary work. They required me to sensitively tune in to the experience of another and accurately portray the essence of it back to them. Both these uses of mirroring are probably familiar to anyone acquainted with the psychodrama method.

Over the years my interest in mirroring has increased and my confusion has grown alongside it. I have heard the word mirroring used in a number of different ways and wondered, are we all talking about the same thing? As a counsellor trainer I hear my students say, "I was mirroring my client's body position there as I leaned forward and uncrossed my legs". In other places, I have heard colleagues mention that a client "wants to be mirrored all the time" or clinicians assess that a client "didn't get enough mirroring as a child". I have also heard an oft repeated phrase in the psychodrama community that "doubling is for self-acceptance and mirroring is for self-awareness" or was it the other way around? I was often unsure. These confusions heightened as I listened out for the term and realised that it *was* being used in different ways.

This questioning led me on a search to understand the term mirroring. Whilst it is an important element of psychodrama, there is not a lot written about it in the literature. My quest for clarity became a bit of a detective game as I looked for different uses of the term mirroring and researched its historical origins. I examined the original writings of J.L. and Zerka Moreno and, to my delight, found their writings not as impenetrable as rumours had led me to believe. I discovered that they conceptualise mirroring as both a therapeutic technique *and* as an early stage of human development. The quote at the beginning of this article describes both the essence of the mirroring experience itself and my own journey of discovery as I investigated this topic. My confusion about mirroring had arisen because the *same* term is used in related but different ways, often without any distinction made. When we are mirrored accurately there is usually greater self-awareness *and* the feeling of having been seen by a sensitive other. Ideally we feel recognised, accepted and more complete through the experience of being mirrored. We move from seeing things "through a glass darkly" and only "in part", to knowing our self more fully and being known "face to face". While I had started out looking through a glass darkly, I ended up feeling I had a more face to face understanding of mirroring. Hopefully this article will provide greater clarity and also bring us face to face with mirroring.

The article begins with an historical perspective on the context and development of the mirror technique in the psychodrama writings of J.L. and Zerka Moreno. Extensive quotations are included to convey the full flavour of their ideas. Attention is then turned to the Morenos' use of the concept as an early stage of human development. More recent writings on mirroring are then

discussed, including a summary of Max Clayton's work, followed by a consideration of the timely use of mirroring as a psychodrama production technique. It should be noted that this article confines itself to the topic of mirroring and does not enter into a comparative discussion regarding mirroring and doubling.

The Mirror Technique in the Writings of J.L. and Zerka Moreno

In 1946 J.L. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama, published the first written description of his work in *Psychodrama First Volume*. He wanted to publish thoughts and practices that he had been developing over the past 20 years in order to reach a wider audience. Primarily he was writing for a traditional psychiatric community, detailing the unique and effective features of psychodrama, sociodrama and sociatry. Outlining the main features of psychodrama, Moreno (1946:177) writes:

Psychodrama puts the patient on a stage where he can work out his problems with the aid of a few therapeutic actors. It is a method of diagnosis as well as a method of treatment. One of its characteristic features is that role-acting is organically included in the treatment process. It can be adapted to every type of problem, personal or group, of children or adults. It can be applied to every age level. Problems in the nursery as well as the deepest psychic conflicts can be brought nearer solution by its aid. The psychodrama is human society in miniature, the simplest possible setup for a methodical study of its psychological structure. Through techniques such as the auxiliary ego, spontaneous improvisation, self-presentation, soliloquy, the interpolation of resistance, new dimensions of the mind are opened up, and, what is most important, they can be explored under experimental conditions.

The telling aspect of this summary, and of the 100 or so pages of *Psychodrama First Volume* where Moreno describes psychodramatic techniques in detail along with case studies, is that there is *no* mention of mirroring anywhere! In his earliest exposition of his therapeutic approach, there is no discussion of what we today would consider a central element of psychodrama production. It is of interest that in the introduction to the third edition of *Psychodrama First Volume* published in 1964, Moreno does mention "mirror playing" (p.v) as a type of role playing, but this did not appear in the 1946 edition. However, while Moreno does not directly use the term mirroring in 1946 he does extensively discuss a "new technique" (p.243) central to his work, which he calls the auxiliary ego. It is important to remember that Moreno was primarily working in a psychiatric hospital setting with deeply disturbed psychotic or catatonic patients. In this context the auxiliary ego was usually an assistant, although sometimes it was Moreno himself, who was well acquainted with the patient's clinical history and was able to portray their life to them while they passively observed it. In this next

quote, Moreno (p.235) describes the way in which he portrayed important life events to a catatonic or locked in syndrome patient in order to try to help the patient regain his memory.

I proceeded in the course of the session, to aid his memory and to bring back, piece by piece, the things he had forgotten, things she had done for him, words she had said to him, and promises he had made in return. This technique should be of particular interest to the individual-centered psychoanalyst who comes often to a deadlock in the course of treatment.

Moreno does not call this technique mirroring as such, but we are certainly seeing the spirit of it here in his attempts to show the patients to themselves through the auxiliary ego.

While J.L. Moreno was publishing his three psychodrama volumes as large books, his assistant and soon to be wife Zerka Toeman was publishing their collaborative work in scholarly journals such as *Sociometry* and *Group Psychotherapy*. Her writings are more technical and technique oriented while his tend to be more visionary and inspirational. In an early *Sociometry*, Zerka Toeman (1946:181-182) clearly describes the first written instance of the mirror technique and the way in which the Morenos used it with their patients.

In the mirror technique the patient remains in the audience as spectator while the auxiliary ego takes the patient's part, reproducing gestures typical of the patient and creating a series of scenes and situations which the patient will recognize as her own experiences, enabling the patient to 'see herself as others see her.' This technique is perhaps more difficult as the patient does not lend support or point the way for the auxiliary ego. It is used a) with patients who are completely non-cooperative and need to be stirred into action, b) for the purpose of restoring amnesic experiences to patients, and c) for patients who have never registered the events taking place around them, that is, not to restore memory but to acquaint them with certain facts and events.

Toeman goes on to describe an episode where she utilised the mirror technique with a mandated amnesic patient. She mirrored the patient's actions by throwing furniture around, cursing and threatening to hit a nurse, as the patient had done during her hospital stay. This caught the attention of the patient and shocked her into realising the magnitude of her behaviour. Toeman's last remark is worthy of note. "It should be added that deep action catharsis is gained in mirror technique, not only by the patient but also by the auxiliary ego..." (p.183). When performed successfully, mirroring can have a profound effect on patient and therapist alike.

In 1952, J.L. Moreno wrote an important article on psychodramatic production in which he illustrates the use of the mirror technique to a group of interested nurses. He describes how the technique is often used to provoke the patient out of non-involvement with their lives because they cannot tolerate the

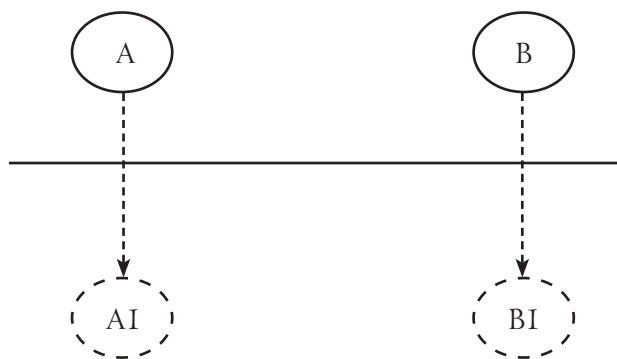
distortion and misrepresentation of themselves that the mirror offers (p.263). By changing the recapitulation of their story somewhat, the patient's warm up is increased and they are more likely to move into action.

When a person looks at himself and sees himself looking ugly, he may try to do something about it. We want him to become provoked by the mirror. This is one reason we use this technique. The mirror portrays you in a distorted way. You may become angry with it because it does not appear to be you. . . The technique has achieved its aim if the patient realizes that a mirror of him is attempted. If some part seems distorted or misrepresented, they step in and interfere with the mirror. They tell the portraying ego that he is an imposter! That is exactly what we want from a person who has been mute and uncooperative and non-active, in order to get him going.

Seven years passed and in 1959 *Psychodrama Second Volume* was published. In it Moreno details ten therapy techniques, listing the mirror technique as number ten and describing it with an illustrative diagram in the context of in-depth couple's therapy (p.53).

The technique of the mirror 'portrays' the body image and the unconscious of A at a distance from him so that he can see himself. The portrayal is done by an auxiliary ego, who has made a close study of A. The same process of mirroring is also applied to B, the other partner of the pair. A and B can see each other in the mirror of the two auxiliary egos portraying them. In the mirror technique the protagonist is a spectator, an onlooker, he looks at the psychological mirror and sees himself.

TECHNIQUE OF THE MIRROR



This simple diagram portrays the essence of the mirror technique in early psychodrama. A and B, the patients or protagonists, observe themselves portrayed by their auxiliaries AI and BI in a series of situations. They may “resent” or “approve” their mirror, as well as learning about their partner through the

auxiliaries' representations. Mirroring, as illustrated by this diagram, is inherent in Moreno's (1959) vision of psychological health, the ability to see yourself as others see you.

By 1959 Zerka Toeman had become Zerka Moreno and continued to publish in scholarly journals. In an article (1959:9) in *Group Psychotherapy*, she details a range of psychodrama techniques including:

Mirror technique – This is used when the patient is unable to represent himself in word and action as, for instance, in catatonia, or after psychotic episodes or shock therapy which produced residual or pseudo-amnesic states. An auxiliary ego is placed on the action portion of the psychodramatic space, the patient or group of patients remaining seated in the audience or group portion. The auxiliary ego proceeds to represent the patient, assuming his identity, is addressed by the director by the patient's name, and reproducing the patient's behavior and interaction with others, either real or delusionary – all as seen through the eyes of the patient. The patient sees himself 'as if in a mirror' how other people experience him.

The mirror technique is well described here and is certainly recognisable to psychodrama practitioners today, but it continues to be represented as an application with severely ill patients who remain passive recipients. No doubt this was due to the psychiatric hospital setting and the severity of mental health issues treated there, but the passivity of the patient and the consequent need for a knowledgeable auxiliary is striking. In the same 1959 article Zerka Moreno briefly mentions three other “Behind Your Back” mirror techniques used at the Morenos' Beacon Institute to stimulate response and recovery from their “physically present, but psychologically absent” patients (p.12).

1. Behind the Back Audience Technique – where the audience is “asked to leave” the theatre but remains, “pretending” not to witness the protagonist's drama.
2. The Turn Your Back Technique – where protagonists and director literally turn their backs to the audience if shame or embarrassment is present.
3. The Black-Out Technique – where the lights are turned off and all actions are carried out in the dark so the protagonist can go through a painful experience unobserved.

Ten more years passed before *Psychodrama Third Volume* was published in 1969, jointly authored by J.L. and Zerka Moreno. On page 240 they describe the main rules and techniques of psychodrama, including mirroring. Zerka Moreno's publication (1969:80-81) in *Group Psychotherapy* that same year utilises the identical quote to describe the mirror technique. Notice again how it is described for use with patients who are primarily unwilling or unable to engage in action themselves.

Mirror: When the patient is unable to represent himself, in word or action, an auxiliary ego is placed on the action portion of the psychodramatic space. The patient or patients remain seated in the group portion. The auxiliary ego re-enacts the patient, copying his behavior and trying to express his feelings in word and movement, showing the patient or patients "as if in a mirror" how other people experience them.

The mirror may be exaggerated, employing techniques of deliberate distortion in order to arouse the patient to come forth and change from a passive spectator into an active participant, an actor, to correct what he feels is not the right enactment and interpretation of himself.

Thus over 23 years and three volumes we see a gradual shift. What J.L. Moreno referred to originally as an aspect of the auxiliary ego developed into the mirror technique that is recognisable today. Its purpose, to reflect to a patient others' experiences of them, was consistent but its application remained limited. While the Morenos may have been using the mirror technique in other contexts with higher functioning individuals, their writings were confined to the treatment of severe psychiatric illness. Their hope was that the mirror technique would catalyse catatonic patients to action, either through self-recognition or through rejection of the mirror's portrayal. Undoubtedly, there were other applications of mirroring being used in various clinical and training settings throughout the psychodrama world. However, the further development of the mirror technique and its broader utilisation in training and therapy groups would wait another 23 years for the work of Dr. Max Clayton. But before moving to this we must consider the Morenos' other use of the term mirror, as an early stage of human development.

The Mirror as a Stage in Moreno's Theory of Human Development

The other context in which J.L. Moreno wrote about the mirror was in terms of human development. He proposed a theory based on five developmental stages: the matrix of all identity, the double, the mirror, role reversal and acting in the role of the other (Fox, 1987). Regarding the third phase, when a child can recognise themselves in the mirror a new stage of the developing self has occurred. In this stage the infant begins to differentiate themselves from their mother and environment, and two way relationships develop (Moreno, 1952). Ideally from a base of unconditional acceptance the mother or significant caregiver offers the infant mirroring, reflecting back the child's feelings, behaviours, ideas and attributes. The child is then able to safely explore their sense of 'Who I am' to gain self-acceptance and develop self-awareness through seeing themselves as others see them (Maher, 2009).

If the child's mirroring experience is adequate it will also enable them to develop an ability to be aware of unpleasant aspects of the self. This in turn

enables fragmenting roles to be brought into relationship with more progressive roles, generating greater harmony and integration (Daniels, 2006). Discovering this developmental sequence, Moreno developed the mirror technique to correct inaccurate or insufficient mirroring that may have occurred in early childhood. Inaccurate or insufficient mirroring makes it difficult for an individual to accurately differentiate themselves from others and have a clear perception of self. Individuals may feel somehow deficient or shamed and experience difficulty in labelling internal states, self-regulating and feeling empathy for others. Moreno would often encounter this phenomenon in his clinical work and had thus devised both a developmental theory to explain it, the stage of the mirror, and a therapeutic tool to address it, the mirror technique. According to Moreno (1959) then, an important aspect of psychological health is being able to see ourselves as others see us. This ability emerges during the stage of the mirror and can be corrected later in life through the technique of the mirror.

The Mirror Technique After the Morenos

Following on from the Morenos' writings, little attention was paid in the literature to the topic of mirroring over the next few decades. In his popular book *Acting In* (1988), Blatner devotes less than a page to the subject, but does maintain that mirroring facilitates greater awareness particularly of non-verbal messages and can be used as a tool for "self-confrontation" (p.15). During this period another important book (Williams, 1989) mentions mirroring briefly and discusses a "mirroring position" from which a protagonist can watch the re-enactment of the scenes of their drama from an observer's position. And in 2007 Kellerman makes an important contribution, discussing the wider therapeutic benefits of mirroring and drawing a distinction between idealising, validating and subjective mirroring. However, the clearest articulation of mirroring, its rationale, use and limitations, remains Clayton's 1992 book *Enhancing Life and Relationships: A Role Training Manual*.

In this book and in other writings, Clayton discusses the purposes and benefits of mirroring and gives clear guidance on its production. In his view, the primary purpose of mirroring is to bring greater self-awareness and differentiation to the protagonist. "Any behaviour by others to enhance that person's awareness of their physical body, impulses, emotions and feelings will further autonomous development at that stage" (Clayton, 1991:16). He emphasises the non-evaluative nature of mirroring. It is purely to focus attention on a person's functioning and any moralising or criticism is unhelpful and confusing to the recipient. Mirroring is therapeutic and while the truth presented sometimes shocks, confirmation of accuracy from group members and repetition makes it difficult for the protagonist to dismiss. The purpose of mirroring is thus both mundane and lofty. "It's designed to heighten awareness, to enlarge our senses and through the enlargement of our senses to enable us to enlarge our whole beings" (Clayton & Carter, 2004:43). Clayton (1992) goes on to provide detailed guidance for the effective

application of mirroring in the course of a psychodrama.

1. Capture the attention of the protagonist and the group in order to propose an interlude of mirroring will occur and to ensure they remain spontaneously warmed-up.
2. Decide which moment of the protagonist's action the mirroring will focus on.
3. Identify which of the auxiliaries was attuned to that action and could thus act as a mirror.
4. Warm the auxiliaries up to what they saw, felt and heard in order to portray it.
5. Remind all participants that the purpose of the mirroring exercise is for observation and exploration in order to gain a new perspective and not for evaluation of the protagonist's actions.

Adequate mirroring occurs when the auxiliary "...virtually repeats what the protagonist has already said and done" (Clayton, 1992:27), thus capturing the meaning and feeling tone of the experience. There is conviction and congruence in the portrayal. It looks, sounds and feels real. This enables the protagonist to warm up to themselves and accept the mirroring. Poor mirroring can leave the protagonist conflicted or divert the purpose of the drama. If there are multiple mirrors, Clayton (1992) recommends that the first two or three portray the protagonist more literally while the latter can exaggerate or emphasise different aspects of functioning. He highlights threefold benefits of mirroring for the protagonist.

1. During the mirroring, the spontaneity of the auxiliaries increases the spontaneity of the protagonist.
2. There is an increase in self-awareness that comes about through maintaining a positive emotional connection with the mirror. "This has the sole purpose of making a person see and experience themselves as they are. That is, the person sees a portrait of themselves" (p.28).
3. There is a positive impact on the protagonist's social atom that comes about through their increased self-awareness and the strong bond that can occur with their auxiliaries, which often continues to develop outside of the session.

Clayton and Carter (2004) suggest that effective mirroring enables a greater warm up to creativity and a stronger motivating force to be present in a protagonist. They provide an illustration of the director encouraging other group members to mirror a protagonist. The director encourages the protagonist by saying, "...we'll just have a look. It's not for the purpose of evaluation, it's just to have a look. It's just to make sure that you can develop your experience as

you get together with yourself” (p.40). This example demonstrates the way that mirroring can take a moment out of time, examine it and bring all its various aspects into a protagonist’s awareness. Clayton (1992) also recommends immediate enactment after a mirroring interlude, because the protagonist’s warm up and spontaneity levels will be high. To reflect on or intellectualise the mirroring is to waste it. A producer should simply direct the protagonist to re-enter the scene and act.

The Use of Mirroring in Psychodrama

While mirroring has become an important element of psychodrama production, it is not a panacea. Care and skill need to be exercised in its use. Clayton (1992:28) cautions that mirroring should take place only after the protagonist has “developed a trusting connectedness with the surrounding environment”. This surrounding environment would include both the therapeutic group of which they are part, as well as their inner relationship with themselves. Without this trusting connectedness a protagonist is much more likely to orient to self-criticism or self-rejection. That is why mirroring should not involve judgment but merely facilitate awareness and appreciation of what is. In order for a protagonist to accept mirroring, there needs to be a reasonable level of self-acceptance already established. Some individuals find mirroring unacceptable, particularly if they have developed a highly fragmented role system (Daniels, 2006) or have previously experienced negative or inadequate mirroring and are habituated to self-rejection (Maher, 2009). This self-rejection might indicate that there are unresolved issues from an earlier childhood developmental stage. In this case doubling may be a more appropriate intervention to increase self-acceptance and build up progressive roles. Knowledge of Moreno’s developmental stages thus assists the practitioner to assess the most appropriate intervention, mirroring, doubling or role reversal, for a particular protagonist. The psychodramatic axiom, “doubling is for self-acceptance and mirroring is for self-awareness” is therefore a good rule to bear in mind when considering the needs of a protagonist.

Conclusion

The early writings of J.L. and Zerka Moreno give us insight into the development of their ideas regarding mirroring, both as a technique and as a stage of human development. Both these meanings are often referred to generically as “mirroring”, which has been the source of confusion. The mirror technique began as one aspect of the auxiliary ego’s therapeutic work with severely withdrawn patients. While described as a method to assist memory recovery and self-portrayal, the recipient of the mirroring was passive and the technique dependent on the auxiliary having extensive knowledge of a patient’s life. Thus while this early

feature is familiar to us, its application was different from the way that mirroring is generally conceptualised today.

J.L. and Zerka Moreno also developed a theory of human development which included the mirror stage. This occurs when a toddler is able to recognise themselves as separate from their environment, enabling them to differentiate thoughts, feelings and actions. Mirroring deficiencies can lead to difficulties with differentiation, self-esteem and shame and can be remedied using the mirror technique to increase awareness of self through the eyes of others. In more recent times, Max Clayton has given fullest expression to mirroring as one of a number of important psychodramatic production tools. He describes the effectiveness of the technique in enhancing self-awareness and as a remedial intervention for developmental deficiencies, while cautioning against its use for evaluative purposes.

My investigation into the differences between the mirror as an early Morenian technique and its conception as a stage of human development has assisted me to “see through a glass darkly”. I have benefitted from delving into the Morenos’ original writings and appreciated both the historical development of the mirror technique and the therapeutic context in which it was utilised. I can now see how it is both an important psychodrama production method and a useful assessment tool for identifying remedial work. I am increasingly coming to a “face to face” relationship with mirroring that assists me to understand and apply it with greater satisfaction and effectiveness.

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