

Dr. J.L. Moreno – Marriage Therapist

by Richard Fowler

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Last Christmas eve, I married Heather. It is the third marriage for both of us. This fact has increased our fascination and interest in what makes marriages succeed, flourish and grow. Over the last 25 years, I have worked with many couples. Recently, I have been seeing even more couples. I have been seeking to find effective and creative ways of helping them to help themselves improve their relationships. I have found that the ideas, theories, methods and techniques that were developed by J. L. Moreno 50 to 70 years ago can be at times like a “magic potion” to enrich and renew these relationships.



J. L. Moreno is known as the inventor of psychodrama and sociometry. But “Marriage Therapist” – hardly! Yet he was a pioneer in this area. He wrote a lot about it. He clearly enjoyed it, and worked with many couples. Some of his interest in the subject may have come from his own experience. He married three times and he had a long term relationship before he left Austria. He said that it was when working with a couple that the “Theatre of Spontaneity” turned into a “Therapeutic Theatre”.

The literature about psychodrama virtually ignores his work in this field. I know of no psychodramatists, with the exception of Tony Williams, who have written about his work in the field and developed it. Today in Australia and New Zealand, there are psychodramatists who are using many creative ways of working with couples.

Counselling couples is quite different from working with individuals. Often this kind of work is difficult and challenging. Trainee counsellors and experienced counsellors alike search for new and different ways of effectively helping these couples to improve and enrich their relationships or to separate with the minimum of hurt and pain. When I have suggested in training workshops that we could make use of psychodrama in marital and couple work, there has been a murmur of approval around the group.

Even today, when there are many approaches and techniques that Family Therapists, Gestalt therapists, NLP practitioners, behaviourists, cognitive therapists and the like have developed, Moreno’s methods and ways of working still stand out and have much to teach us. He employed a rich variety of approaches and

techniques that can be of immense value to counsellors working with couples.

It is not easy to read what Moreno has to say. His writing about marriage is spread throughout his books. Sometimes his presentation is confusing and unclear and his books lack adequate indexes. I have enjoyed the challenge of setting out what he has to say in a systematic order.

The cases he describes go back to the early 1920s and went on until at least 1964.

I. One Elusive Night

Something New and Exciting Emerges

At the beginning of *Psychodrama Vol I*, (Moreno:1946:3-5), he tells how what happened one "elusive" night when working with a couple turned the Theatre of Spontaneity into a Therapeutic Theatre.

Barbara and George

Barbara was a main attraction in Moreno's Theatre of Spontaneity in Vienna because she was so good at playing an innocent young woman. She was in love with a young playwright called George who used to come and sit in the front row and watch her. They were to marry. Then George came to Moreno and told him how when they were alone Barbara acted like a bedevilled creature who used the most abusive language, and that when he tried to defend himself she would scratch him. Moreno told George that he would try a remedy. He suggested to Barbara that she play more down-to-earth roles. The first of these was as a prostitute who had been murdered. On the stage, she swore, she punched, she kicked, and

afterwards was exuberant.

George reported that she still had fits of temper at home but they had lost their intensity. It also made a difference to George who reported that he was more tolerant and less impatient of Barbara.

Moreno also asked Barbara if she would like to act on the stage with George and they acted out scenes from their families of origin, from their childhoods, and of their dreams and plans for the future.

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Robert and Mary

Next he tells the story of his treatment of Robert and Mary. He calls this "A Case of Anxiety Neurosis, Complicated by Matrimonial Conflict." He could equally well have called it "A Matrimonial Conflict complicated by an Anxiety Neurosis". This account covers 30 pages (Ibid:185-215). Robert suffered from what Moreno calls a "time and space neurosis". His anxiety led him to be always in a rush and he could not

bear to have anything out of place. He wanted others, and particularly his wife, to fit in with his “time complex”. The neurosis had fully developed before he met his wife, but “affected and shaped their relationship,” and led to much conflict and tension between them.

Moreno first worked with Robert and then involved Mary as well. He worked with them for many months using a wide variety of techniques. He does not tell us how long it all took and we do not know when it happened, but it was probably in the early 1930s. (He refers to Robert and Mary in *Sociometry I*, 1937.) In this case Moreno worked by himself with the couple without auxiliaries or an audience.

A Marriage Triangle

In addition, there is Moreno’s account, taking 13 pages, (Op cit: 1946:233-245) of “*Intermediate (In-Situ) Treatment of a Matrimonial Triangle.*” Mrs A came to see him complaining that her husband had developed a relationship with another woman. Mrs A suffered from hysterical attacks, suicidal ideas and insomnia. He first saw Mrs A on her own, then he saw Mr A alternately with Mrs A, and later he had sessions with Mrs K, Mr A’s lover.

Moreno says, “The more I went on with the work, the more I realised that I was not treating one person or the other, but an ‘interpersonal-relationship’. The effect of the treatment was first that each partner had a full picture of every other partner, second, a full picture of their inner interpersonal relation and, finally, the realisation of the logic of the affinities that produced the triangle.” Once again Moreno worked on his own with the three people involved as auxiliaries from time to time. How long the treatment took,

he does not say, but it apparently went on over many weeks. It ended with Mr and Mrs A separating upon mutual agreement and Mr A then married Mrs K.

Another Triangle

Further he writes about the “*Psychodramatic Treatment of Marriage Problems.*” This is again about a triangular relationship. Mr and Mrs T came to the theatre and in the first session Mr T revealed that he was in love with another woman, Miss S. Moreno says that he treated them for three months and acted out a total of sixty situations.

Mrs T tried every approach to bring Mr T to continue the marriage. It was to no avail. Moreno comments that “a full catharsis of separation and divorce was attained.” This included Mrs T feeling stronger and losing her vindictiveness to Miss S. His account of this covers 20 pages, (Op cit:1946: 328-347).

He sums up all he says about this in *Psychodrama Vol I* by saying , “Many marital situations and conflicts have been treated by the psychodramatic method. In the majority of cases, an adjustment between the husband and wife was reached.” (Ibid:334)

All the reports of his work with couples in *Psychodrama Vol I* take up 58 pages in a 424 page book.

Pre-Marital Applications of Psychodrama Emerge

Predicting Success

In *Psychodrama Vol III* (Moreno: 1969) there are two sections about one of his great interests – predicting the success of a marriage before it begins. These two sections are

“Psychodrama of a Pre-Marital Couple” and *“Role Testing for Marriage Prediction”* (Ibid:66-83). In the latter Moreno works with a group and a young unnamed couple who had made a request to test their compatibility. The group agreed that the roles of provider, lover, mother-father, partner, host/hostess, citizen, worshipper, emotional companion, intellectual companion, home maker and roommate were crucial. Moreno had each of them take up all these roles in turn while the other watched. In addition, there is a 49 page long verbatim called *“Psychodrama of a Marriage”* (Ibid:84:132) which involved the treatment of yet another triangle.

A Filmed Session

Finally, in *Psychodrama Vol III* there is the *“Psychodrama of a Marriage, A Motion Picture”*. This was filmed at the Faculte de Medicine, at the Sorbonne, in Paris in 1964, and covers 45 pages. (Ibid:133-177) It is about a married couple, Michelle a French woman and Paul an American. It all takes place in one session in front of a packed audience.

In all, these four sections make up 118 pages of a 271 page book, i.e., 43% of the whole volume!

In *Psychodrama Volume II* (Moreno:1959:45) he writes about the therapist working with two or more clients. He calls it *“Interpersonal Therapy”* and says that it is different from individual and group psychotherapy. He says “I have frequently been confronted with emotional difficulties arising between individuals living in close proximity” and “If A and B would be total strangers one could dispose of the urgency by giving each individual therapy. But when two or more persons are interlocked and their living together has become

indispensable to their welfare and often to their very existence, it is often indicated to treat them as an ensemble.” (Ibid:51)

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Moreno also wrote *“The Prediction and Planning of Success in Marriage.”* (Moreno:1951:111-115)

In this he writes about how two people have different spontaneity quotients, one is slower, the other is quicker. He says that success in marriage depends on the way a couple handle their conflicts. That success depends on the solution arrived at and the ease and speed with which it is obtained. He describes how he had couples warm up to difficult moments they might experience in marriage and he helps them to focus on unpleasant realities in the relationship. He enabled them to display hidden roles that would emerge after the wedding.

There is further discussion of these areas in *Sociometry Vol I and Vol II* and *Psychodrama Monographs, Number 7.1.*

II. Moreno's Methods and Techniques

Moreno's methods and techniques show an amazing range and variety of approaches. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly set out the methods and techniques that Moreno used.

A. The Process

Length of Treatment

He sometimes showed himself working in just one session, with just two or three sessions, or many sessions over several months.

Open or Closed Settings

The *open* treatment is carried out in the midst of the community more or less with the full knowledge of the group.

Similarly, psychodramatic treatment is at times *closed*. The patient is taken out of his immediate environment and is placed in a situation constructed for his needs. Only the director and a number of assistants who are assigned to principal roles in the course of treatment are in the theatre.

The Therapist

Moreno worked:

- ◆ by himself with the couple
- ◆ by himself with the auxiliary
- ◆ with a number of auxiliaries
- ◆ with a large audience

The Clients

Moreno's clients involved:

- ◆ one partner
- ◆ both partners, or alternately
- ◆ both partners and a person in the triangular relationship

Moreno said that it would be desirable to have all involved in the

situation present, but in the cases listed above, he does not work with other members of the family.

B. The Marital Drama

The Warm Up

As in all Moreno's work, the concept of the warm up is central. He took a great deal of trouble to involve all parties in the warm up and in the action.

With couples, as in group work or in individual sessions, the warm up is a way for the therapist to move into the world of the clients. It is a way of putting the client or clients at ease.

It is also a way of dealing with the client's resistance to acting and it is a way of moving to action. He also shows how the warm up needs to be developed throughout the enactment until a full catharsis is achieved.

Enactment

Once he moved from warm up to enactment, Moreno used a wide range of techniques. In *Psychodrama II*, (Op cit:1959:51-56) Moreno outlines ten techniques to build a bridge between two people who live together.

- ◆ The technique of *talking it over*, the natural dialogue of the two protagonists, A and B facing one another and interpreting each other's motivations, free associations and reflections, assessing each other's actions *without* a therapist or observer being present.
- ◆ The *same* technique is used but the *therapist is present* in the session as a silent observer.
- ◆ The *therapist* is taking a direct part in the therapeutic interaction between A and B as (a) an *auxiliary ego*, (b) a *participant observer*, (c) an *intermediate*

interpreter of A to B and B to A in separate, alternate sessions or jointly.

- ◆ The *therapist* acts as an *interviewer* of the protagonists in the presence of both.
- ◆ The *therapist* acts as a *catalyser* of interpersonal responsiveness and productivity.
- ◆ The *therapist* acts as a *counsellor and guide*.
- ◆ The technique of *soliloquy*.
- ◆ The technique of *role reversal*.
- ◆ The technique of the *double*.
- ◆ The technique of the *mirror*.

He comments: "All my interactional techniques, including role reversal, double, mirror, etc ... can be used within the strictly verbal systems of psychotherapy." Clearly the first six are a very useful summary of the ways of working with a couple in any form of counselling or therapy. The last four are much more specifically psychodramatic techniques.

If all couples with problems could resurrect their past scenes together they would probably discover that their lives together have been happier than they think at a certain present moment.

In his work with Robert and Mary, he lists and describes his use of the following techniques:

- ◆ *Self Presentation*, (Op cit:1946: 184-185). The patient "lives through" situations that are part of his/her daily life, especially his/her crucial conflicts. He/she also

enacts and represents as concretely as possible every person near to him or her, in other words all those in his or her social atom.

- ◆ *The Soliloquy*, (Ibid:190-197). He says that dramatists such as Eugene O'Neil use this technique for dramatic purposes. In psychodrama it is used to duplicate hidden feelings and thoughts that the patient "actually had in a situation with a partner in life or which he has now, in the moment of performance. Its value lies in its truthfulness. Its aim is catharsis." Its value is also in allowing a couple to become aware of their own and the other's inner self in a most intimate way. "Soliloquy provided a new psychological dimension for them." (Robert and Mary)
- ◆ *Dream Presentation* (Ibid:199-200). Moreno uses the classical psychodrama form of dream enactment, and first warmed up the protagonist to the role of a sleeper and then as a dreamer. He sometimes used the partner as an auxiliary. Dream presentations are a way for a partner to become aware of the other's inner self. Another example of the use of dream presentation in marriage therapy is with Michelle and Paul.
- ◆ *Spontaneous Improvisation*
- ◆ *Soliloquy – Second Type*

During the Motion Picture (Op cit: 1969:114-115), he first has the protagonist act out his relationship with his mother. Then he lists six different techniques he could have used. They are:

- ◆ *Return to the first encounter between the married couple.*
- ◆ *If two people are in love, it is valuable to resurrect the first scenes ... I think it would be well*

for all couples to do this. There is a tendency to remember only the bad that happened. If all couples with problems would resurrect their past scenes together they would probably discover that their lives together have been happier than they think at a certain present moment ...” (Ibid:114)

- ◆ *Reversal of roles.*
- ◆ *Future technique.*
- ◆ *Mirror technique.*
- ◆ *The man’s role as a medical student and his past desire to become a doctor.*
- ◆ *The other woman in his life. The wife’s encounter with her husband’s girlfriend.*

Sharing

At the end of the drama with Paul and Michelle in Paris Moreno said that he would “throw the ball to the audience” because there might be many there who had similar problems. Several people spoke of their own experiences. He says that a psychodramatic session is never terminated unless everybody has been involved in the process, not only as a spectator but as an actor and communicator. At other times, he would use a process of analysis and review to help the individuals involved to understand and integrate what had happened in the course of their couple therapy.

C. Central Theoretical Concepts

Being an Objective Observer

Again and again Moreno shows the value of the partners in an intimate relationship being able to stand back and see the other person in a new light. After George had seen Barbara act out the angry roles on stage he was more tolerant and more relaxed

with her. Both Robert and Mary became less stressed in their relationship.

In watching her husband and Mrs K, Mrs A was able to accept the end of the relationship. Moreno comments, “The effect of the treatment was first that each partner had a full picture of every other partner, second a full picture of their interpersonal relationship and finally, the realisation of the organic logic of the affinities which produced the triangle.”

Catharsis

‘Catharsis’ is a word that Moreno borrowed from Aristotle and Greek drama. It is difficult to describe or to define exactly. It is about purging or cleansing and about liberation and healing. It involves being freed from the emotions in which people are caught. It implies release from tension and a sense of resolution and completeness. It is one aim and goal of therapy.

Moreno says that a “catharsis of integration” means that the individual attains a sense of power and relief. It is not just a momentary satisfaction, nor merely a spontaneous release of emotion, nor an “abreaction”. It involves a lasting change to the individual and his or her relationships.

In the case of couples the catharsis has to be interpersonal. He says that for one couple the catharsis was the result of the “tele-flow” between them.

In dealing with one of the triangular situations he says that there was a catharsis between those involved in the conflict, the man, his wife, and the other woman.

He works towards what he calls a “divorce catharsis”, that is to help a couple separate and find new ways of life in “a nice, pleasant, cultured

way". In concluding his account of his work with Mr and Mrs T, he says that a "full catharsis for a separation and divorce was attained."

Tele

"According to Moreno, 'tele [is] insight into', 'appreciation of [and] feeling for [the] actual make up' of the other ... It is an appreciative mutual exchange; a flow of feeling between one or more people." (Williams:1989) Hence it is a very important concept in working with couples. He says that the aim of treatment with Robert and Mary was to develop "therapeutic tele" in relation to as many individuals in their social and cultural atom as possible.

In working with Mr and Mrs A and Mrs K, Moreno says that what produced the catharsis of healing was the result of the "tele-flow" between them. He says, "In the case of Robert and Mary the dynamic distribution of therapeutic tele had its greatest intensity between the partners themselves." It was this that produced the healing and the catharsis. He speaks of the "therapeutic tele", and "tele-factors" between director, therapist or auxiliary-ego and the client. He says that even the best technique of the auxiliary ego cannot work satisfactorily if the ego of the auxiliary and the client do not "click". Exactly the same thing applies to the therapist or counsellor. In working with couples it is important to use the "positive tele ... which is produced by the affinity between some factor in one person and some factor in the other person actually operating at the moment." (Op cit: 1946:233)

Roles

Moreno's concept of "role" is useful to the couple therapist:

- ◆ It is interpersonal, i.e., it needs two or more individuals to be

actualised and a role always involves a counter-role.

- ◆ Roles involve the whole person. They are not just a fragmented part of the person. When we are in role the whole of us is involved.
- ◆ When one partner claims that she or he loves the other partner, they may only love that person in certain roles. In other roles they may be indifferent or neutral or even actively hate their partner.
- ◆ In predicting the future success or failure of a relationship, Moreno had his subjects put their roles into action. The other partner watched and was often able to observe roles that would otherwise be kept hidden.
- ◆ He used the idea of hidden roles to show why marriages break down and one partner could seek a new relationship outside the marriage.
- ◆ The concept of "hidden roles" can be used to make relationships work better.

Social Atoms

The concept of the "social atom" is central to Moreno's thinking and practice. It is hardly surprising that he makes use of this concept in couple therapy.

In his accounts of working with couples, Moreno tells how he helped them explore scenes from their own and each other's family and childhood. In writing about Mr and Mrs T and explaining why their marriage broke up, he provided diagrams to show how in a marriage the two social atoms are gradually brought together and then later may pull apart.

When a couple form an intimate relationship they bring to that relationship all the baggage of their past and present relationships. When

we marry another person, we form a relationship with all the in-laws.

Cultural Atoms

In describing how Mr T became attracted to Miss S and felt a lack of satisfaction with his wife, Moreno coined the phrase "cultural atom". He used it to describe the relationship between their roles. Mr T's roles as a husband and supporter were met and matched by Mrs T's roles as a wife and homemaker. His roles as a father, a poet and an adventurer were not met. With the two of them, the lover role was in the background. Miss S had the roles to respond to all three roles in Mr T. See role diagrams on page 64 (Ibid:344-345).

D. Other Issues

The Couple on their own

Moreno believed that psychodramatics and a technique such as soliloquy should be restricted as much as possible to the therapeutic theatre. He pointed out that if a couple goes home and endlessly soliloquises it is likely to be entirely counterproductive. However he found that Robert and Mary took their own initiative and applied the methods to their daily lives. This became an important extension of his psychodramatic work.

Sexual Relationships

He briefly touches on methods of helping couples with sexual difficulties. He speaks about how to retrain "sexual actors" using a technique of "therapeutic images". He says that it is helpful to look at the sexual act as a psychodramatic situation in which two actors are engaged. (Ibid:206)

By far the most conspicuous marriage conflict brought to the attention of the psychodramatic consultant is the psychological triangle of husband, wife and a third party, man or woman.

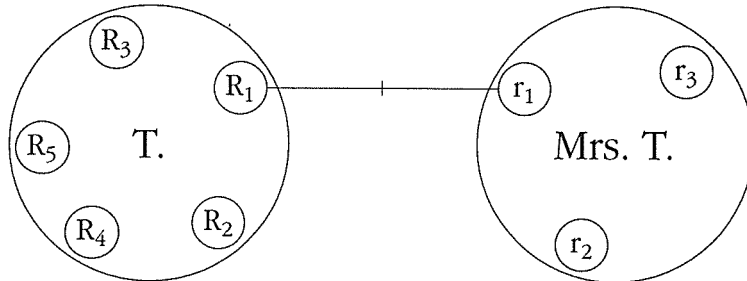
Triangles

Three of his case studies centre on triangular relationships. He says, "By far the most conspicuous marriage conflict brought to the attention of the psychodramatic consultant is the psychological triangle of husband, wife and a third party, man or woman. This situation is so delicate and can bring so much misery and bitterness that the slightest tactlessness in the course of action or during the analysis of the action may produce a deadlock. The director must take great care to make no suggestion as to what course of action might be preferable." (Ibid:330) These relationships are still a major reason for couples to seek the help of a counsellor. Much of what Moreno has to say about triangles is also relevant for one of today's common sources of conflict – the reconstituted family.

Ending a Marriage

He is concerned to help couples develop a satisfactory and productive relationship. He is just as concerned to help couples *end* their relationships in a dignified and humane way if that is what one or both of them want. He says, "A

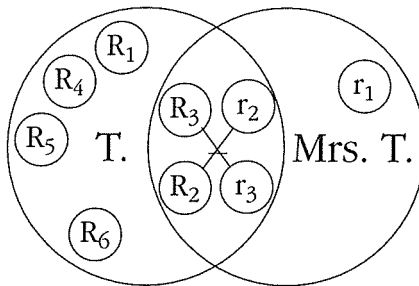
Development of the Cultural Atom, Interrelation of Roles in Marriage



ROLE DIAGRAM I — Pre-marital state

- | | | | |
|----------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| R ₁ | role of lover | r ₁ | role of lover |
| R ₂ | role of supporter | r ₂ | role of homemaker |
| R ₃ | role of husband | r ₃ | role of wife |
| R ₄ | role of poet | | |
| R ₅ | role of adventurer | | |

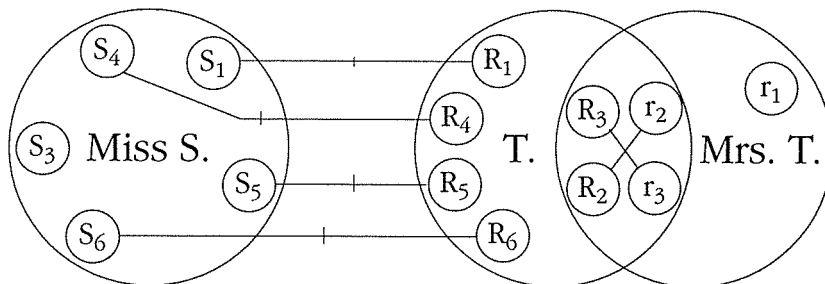
It is in the roles of lover that T. and Mrs. T. are attracted to one another. The other roles do not enter into their relationship at this stage.



ROLE DIAGRAM II — Marital state, initial phase

- R₆ role of father

The roles of husband and supporter in T. are finding fulfillment in Mrs. T.'s roles of wife and homemaker. The roles of poet and adventurer are unfulfilled, and a new unfulfilled role has appeared: the role of father. Both lover-roles are in the background.



ROLE DIAGRAM III — Marital state, later phase
A third person has entered the situation

- | | | | | |
|----------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Miss S.: | S ₁ | role of lover | S ₅ | role of adventurer |
| | S ₃ | role of wife | S ₆ | role of mother |
| | S ₄ | role of poetess | | |

relationship which is initiated with so much affection and dignity, breaks up all too often with an amount of distaste and disillusionment. If love and marriage... must end, why should they not end in a manner which is as dignified as it is humane?" (Ibid:328) So he worked towards what he calls a "full catharsis of separation and divorce."

In the cases of Mr and Mrs A and Mr and Mrs T he showed how the partner who is left and ends up being rejected can gain healing through seeing the partner's interaction with the other person. He says that this can help to bring out issues which have been kept hidden. Thus the grieving and healing process is enhanced.

Conclusion

I have found that Moreno provides a basis from which to develop useful and effective theories, methods and techniques to enrich counselling and therapy with couples. Hence, I am writing a book which will draw on my own work with couples to develop and extend Moreno's ideas.

Moreno says, "Psychodrama should have meaning to husbands, wives and lovers. It should be a **potion** to keep their love together, somewhat like that which we read about in "Midsummer Night's Dream" – a potion to make love." (Ibid:114)

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