

The human being: J.L. Moreno's vision in psychodrama

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Abstract *Integrating two different psychotherapeutic approaches is more and more frequent among psychologists. Psychodrama is often chosen as one. In order to be coherent and efficient, serious attention must be paid to verifying the compatibility of the two chosen approaches when integrating them (even partly), especially in terms of their vision of the human being. In order to facilitate this necessary verification, Norbert Apter reviews here Moreno's psychodrama vision of the human being: a relational being, the spontaneity and creativity of which form the pillars enabling him to actualize his interactions and the interiorized roles on which he relies.*

Introduction

Many psychologists throughout the world rely on psychodrama and its tools. There are many non-psychodramatists who have chosen to integrate only certain aspects of the method into their own school of psychotherapy (psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis, Adlerian analysis, family therapy, cognitive therapy, behavioural therapy, etc . . .). (Blatner & Blatner, 1988, p. 2) list some 13 major therapeutic currents in which professionals chose to include some elements of psychodrama as a tool.

The technique of psychodrama according to a given vision of the human being¹ was developed by the psychiatrist, Jacob Levy Moreno (1889–1974). However, visions of the human being underlying various implementations of psychodrama are diverse and varied. Many people use psychodrama based on an approach that differs from Moreno's vision of the human being. In order to proceed to the required verification of the theoretical compatibility of two different approaches (Norcross, 1998, p. 18), one needs to consider the underlying reference framework of each. It therefore means that, when associating psychodrama with another approach, one needs to check whether one's basic theoretical vision of the human being is compatible with Moreno's.

It therefore seemed important to me to briefly review the original vision of the individual in psychodrama, which lies at the very basis of this particular method's coherence and efficacy. That is the goal of this paper.

Existing literature on Moreno's psychodrama views the individual as a relational being, the spontaneity and creativity of which form the pillars enabling him to actualize his interactions and the interiorized roles on which he relies.

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The relationship

‘At the beginning is relationship’. Such is the title of Alice Marciano’s book (Marciano, 1984, p. 7) on the philosophy of *I and Thou* by Martin Buber. This quotation is taken from the fundamental work by the famous philosopher (Buber, 1923, 1969, p. 3). It is also one of the fundamental concepts behind Moreno’s vision.

Indeed, ever since 1920 Moreno shared Martin Buber’s awareness of the fundamental importance of dialogue as a true encounter between *I* and *Thou* (the other, as an *alter*, non fixed, to be discovered and encountered.). Non-encounters, non-dialogues occur most often between *I* and *It* (the other, whose true, intrinsic otherness *I* does not acknowledge, which *I* puts aside as *It*, which is known, fixed, foreseeable). Moreno, the pioneer of group therapy and creator of psychodrama and sociometry, developed a therapy based on relationships as promoters of true encounter, of reciprocal presence.

In *Psychodrama: Volume 1* (Moreno, 1946, 1985) Moreno uses the image of an eye exchange to illustrate this understanding, an empathic reciprocal contact, which characterizes the special moment of encounter.

‘A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face.
And when you are near I will tear your eyes out
and place them instead of mine,
and you will tear my eyes out
and will place them instead of yours,
then I will look at you with your eyes . . .
and you will look at me with mine.’

(Frontispiece)

Moreno thus spoke of psychodrama as a therapy of relationships.

Spontaneity and creativity

In psychotherapy, Moreno was the first one to stress the instant (Kovel, 1976, p. 5) the present moment, the Here and Now, *Hic et Nunc*, from which spontaneity and creativity can spring up. This takes on even a wider significance, since, in his eyes, spontaneity and creativity are the two pillars of good health. Spontaneity enables us to appropriately respond to a new situation, even though this new situation might remind us of a previous one (Moreno, 1934, 1993).

Thus spontaneity becomes a catalyzer for creativity. It is the fuel which kindles the fire of the creative act in the present moment; the present being essentially unprecedented, unfamiliar, and made up of complex, specific and unique internal and external circumstances. ‘Creation begins with an individual’s capacity to be open to multiple internal and external messages, and then to develop a response that captures that decision’s spontaneity’ (Blatner & Blatner, 1988, p. 2).

It is the energy of spontaneity and creativity which enable us in the Here-and-Now to transform, to actualize our Self (Moreno, 1934, 1993).

Actualization

‘Whatever the significance of the influence stemming from interpersonal relations which determine an individual, every interaction in a given relationship bears within itself a certain degree of freedom’ (Leutz, 1985, p. 6).² Moreno had an existentialist view on life. Every human being, as valid as any other, ‘chooses’ the best—or least detrimental—at any given moment in time, taking into account internal and external circumstances in the process. As

Carl Rogers will argue several years later, just like any other living element, the human being 'can' and 'knows': no one needs to tell a plant how to obtain the water or the minerals it needs, nor how to orient itself towards the sun and the light; it does so on its own. The same innate tendency to grow and develop exists in human beings. This is what Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1972, p. 8) and Carl Rogers (Rogers & Ransom, 1972, p. 19; Rogers *et al.*, 1976, p. 20) both humanist-existentialists, called 'the innate tendency towards self-actualization'. Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, wrote in 'L'être et le néant' (Sartre, 1943, p. 23) 'I choose myself, not in my being, but in my way of being'.³

Thus the human being faces the challenge of being and acting in the present moment, beyond what he created and beyond what he was made to be, for sure changing his world, if not the world at large (Moreno, 1969, 1972).

Moreno's existentialist trust in the innate potential of human beings induced his hostile view of psychoanalysis (Moreno, 1967, p. 16), that he perceived to be negativist and excluding of all action. He believed action and interaction to be essential parts of the life of any human being. Human beings have the urge to act and interact: it is a part of their human condition; and it undoubtedly does influence their state of being (emotionally, physically, psychologically, ...). Moreno chose to develop an action-oriented group therapy which was to become psychodrama.

Action and interaction

In the beginning, a baby interacts with his mother (or father, or any other significant person) inside and through the mother's womb. Upon his birth, he/she enters the realm of relational interactions. This is what Moreno (Moreno, 1934, 1993) calls *the social universe*, where each social atom (a person's emotional connections, whether real or wished for by either party) is linked to other atoms. This creates networks that merge to form the social universe (Moreno, 1951, p. 11).

It is within this first social atom that the newborn baby begins to learn about the world, through actions such as crying, screaming, smiling, laughing, making noises, pointing his fingers, etc. And it is through the actions of people in his environment who respond or don't respond to his claims and needs, who come or don't come when he beckons, that the baby begins to establish the first links between action and reaction. His/her response to life's stimuli is based on external and internal data, which are inherent to his/her own experience and to his/her particular situation. Obviously he/she experiences a stage of natural co-dependency. Moreno (Moreno, 1946, 1985) calls it the *child's first universe* ('all-identity', then 'all-reality' leading to the beginning of his/her differentiation from his/her mother). The baby already experiences roles, without however acknowledging this consciously.

The second universe produces a true distinction between experience and its representation. The infant will consciously play out various roles with his teddy bear, his dolls or his toys and will become aware of the roles he is granted by his environment. Thus develops the Self. Leni Verhofstadt-Denève (2000) distinguishes 'six self-constructions or dimensions, each corresponding to a central question:

Central question

1. Who am I?
2. Who would I like to be?
3. What are others like?
4. What should others be like?
5. How do others perceive me?
6. How should others perceive me?

Self-construction

- Self-Image*
Ideal-Self
Alter-Image
Ideal Alter
Meta-Self
Ideal-Meta-Self

Leni Verhofstadt-Denève (2000, p. 87)

The child plays with these various self-constructions and questions, in order to get acquainted with them, and to learn and come to terms with his/her reality. The various characters enacted in his games embody these dynamics that he/she needs to explore through the interaction that he/she creates. Through the spontaneity and the creativity of the child's games and his/her initial development, he/she is developing his/her capacity of adjusting and evolving his/her actions, his/her interactions and roles in order to optimize his/her capacity to adapt to his/her reality.

Roles

As outlined by G.H. Mead (Mead, 1934, 1963), interactions are of vital importance in a child's learning of roles, since he/she interiorizes a separate individual, as well as this other individual's image of him/herself. Moreno (Moreno, 1961, p. 15) defines role as the way of being and the way of doing of a person who 'reacts at a given point in time, to a given situation, in which other persons or objects partake'.

In a person's social universe, roles can be manifold: roles linked to a physical reality, somatic roles (such as the eater, the feeder, the sleeper . . .), roles linked to relational and socio-cultural systems (such as the mother, the father, the child, the teacher . . .), or roles defined by one's imagination, psychodramatic roles (such as *a* mother, *a* father, *a* child, *a* teacher . . .) 'People are more than the sum of the roles they play' (Verhofstadt-Denève, 2000, p. 21). In each specific act, roles become synthesized. Roles are the expression in which the Self manifests itself, its functioning and its dysfunctioning. They express its happy and unhappy states and a person's ways of being and acting in response to them. Paradoxically, they might even be the very source of the Self (Moreno, 1937, p. 12).

If Moreno considers health as an actualization process of roles and the Self, based on the two pillars of spontaneity and creativity, he considers pathology as a state that is frozen in patterns which got stuck; e.g. this psychotic patient, who was a World War II survivor, would panic and rush and hide under the closest table every time a door was slammed; or this other man who had spent 25 years in a psychiatric hospital and upon his release, he still absolutely needed to wear a coat, a hat and dark glasses in order to go and fill out a form in some administration, so that the CIA and the FBI would not catch him. At moments like these, there no longer seems to be any access to spontaneity and creativity. This bereaves the individual, as if the rigid internalized role(s) no longer included the resources required to trigger the process of actualization. Only reflexes and automatic responses prevail. Repeating rigid ways of being and acting limits all prospects, they become quasi sterile. Once a role freezes, the individual becomes incapable of adjusting to the diversity of a novel situation.

Conclusion: Creating a coherent environment for the person

Psychodrama is a therapy of relationships, where the person can explore and try to reconcile various parts of his life (past, present or anticipated). The repertoire of roles he/she has interiorized since his/her childhood can be called upon 'as if' he/she were to experience them in the present, in the Here-and-Now. This playing, this 'transitional space', which is indispensable for development (Winnicott, 1971, p. 22), enables numerous psychic, physical and behavioural dimensions to come alive.

Supported by a qualified psychodramatist, an individual can experience his/her roles (be they frozen or not) without any hazards, through games, plays or actions, and add spontaneity and creativity. This tremendous asset in development is specific to psychodrama. Marcia Karp (T.E.P., a student of Moreno's) often quotes Zerka Moreno: 'Psychodrama is a

way of practising life without being punished for making mistakes' (personal comment to the author). Indeed, actively searching for self-actualization implies the possibility of making mistakes, as is the case for any type of search. As John A. Wheeler, the eminent physician, wrote: 'Science can only advance by making all possible mistakes' (Wheeler, 1981, p. 24)—and by recognizing them. This promotes the *positive regard* as Carl Rogers would call it (Rogers & Ransom, 1972, p. 19; 1984, p. 40; Rogers *et al.*, 1976, p. 20), and it creates one of the bases for safety in a process of change in which diverse identifiable moments (Apter, 1999, p. 23) are often intermingled.

Moreno's psychodrama takes place in an environment where the human being's complexities and internalised roles are accepted. There is neither judgement, nor analysis or interpretation. If other therapeutic approaches (Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis, Transactional Analysis, Family Therapy, etc.) have opted for more or less significant deciphering keys, no such step is foreseen in Moreno's psychodrama. The specificity of each individual's unicity (Apter, 1996, p. 6) is respected and attended in psychodrama without *a priori*. The individual's own frame of reference and the specificity of the possible frame of reference of each role, are accepted and trusted, as is the assumption that active experience thereof through confrontation and reconciliation of roles can enable a person to actualize his positioning, his way of being and behaving. Each individual, through the deployment of activation, can (re)assess that which to him seems good or not, that which is a mistake or which is appropriate. Thus in psychodrama he/she can, re-actualize him/herself through action, in a trusting and confident environment.

Psychodrama is based on the coherence of this vision of the human being. Moreno created ways of doing, ways of helping that are intimately connected with how he perceived the human being. As did S. Freud, C. Jung, E. Berne and many others. Each psychotherapy's consistency is related to this coherence between the vision of the human being and the means chosen to help him. When integrating two approaches, the question that remains to be solved is whether both visions of the human being are compatible.

Notes

- 1 Even though one could attribute different connotations to 'human being', 'individual', and 'person', in this paper, they will be taken as synonyms.
- 2 Quotation translated by the author of this article.
- 3 *idem*.

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Résumé *Intégrer deux approches différentes de la psychothérapie est de plus en plus fréquent parmi les psychologues. Le psychodrame est souvent choisie comme l'une d'elle. Afin d'être cohérent et efficace, il faut porter une attention sérieuse à vérifier la compatibilité des deux approches que l'on choisit d'intégrer (même partiellement), et ce, spécialement en terme de leur vision de l'être humain. Afin de faciliter cette vérification nécessaire, Norbert Apter revisite la vision en psychodrame qu'a Moreno de l'être humain: un être relationnel, dont la spontanéité et la créativité forment les piliers lui donnant la capacité d'actualiser les interactions et les rôles intériorisés sur lesquels il s'appuie.*

Zusammenfassung *Psychologen neigen immer häufiger dazu zwei verschiedene psychotherapeutische Ansätze zu integrieren.. Einer der gewählten Ansätze ist oft das Psychodrama. Damit jedoch die Kohärenz und die Wirksamkeit gewährleistet sind, muss die Vereinbarkeit der beiden (auch wenn nur teilweise) zu integrierenden Ansätze sorgfältig untersucht werden, und dies speziell was die Weltanschauung des menschlichen Wesens betrifft. Um diese notwendige Nachprüfung zu erleichtern bereist Norbert Apter die Weltanschauung die Moreno vom menschlichen Wesen hat: ein in Beziehung stehendes Wesen, dessen Spontaneität und Kreativität seine Stützpfiler darstellen, die ihm die Fähigkeit geben die Interaktionen und die verinnerlichten Rollen auf denen er sich stützt, zu aktualisieren.*