

## Psychodrama As An Integrative Approach

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### Introduction

**Psychodrama** is primarily an action approach to group therapy in which clients explore their problems through role playing, enacting situations using various dramatic devices to gain insight, discover their own creativity, and develop behavioral skills. The scenes are played as if they were occurring in the here-and-now, even though they might have their origins in a memory or an anticipated event. This approach was created in the mid-1930s by J. L. Moreno (1889–1974) and later developed by his wife, Zerka Toeman Moreno, and by many other followers. Psychodrama weaves together imagination, intuitive impulse, physical action, and various dramatic devices to explore a wide range of psychological problems. J. L. Moreno did not believe that the verbal route was the best way to access the psyche. He looked for a more primal level of human development and found it in action and interaction underlying the level of speech. That action could best be studied and influenced in the form of improvisational theater.

Classical psychodrama is a complex and intense method that should be conducted only by highly training practitioners; however, most psychotherapists can benefit from utilizing a variety of psychodrama techniques and principles as adjuncts to a wide range of therapies and educational approaches (Blatner, 2005b). Rather than being one “school of thought” among many, psychodrama offers tools to help people relate to one another more effectively. These tools can significantly enhance an integrative approach to therapy and can foster problem solving, communications, and self-awareness (Blatner, 2001). In this sense, “drama” doesn’t refer to behaving in a histrionic fashion, nor to theatrics; rather, it pertains to reworking our lives as if they were dramatic situations and we were the playwrights.

Psychodrama had its origins in the **Theater of Spontaneity**, which Moreno started in Vienna in 1921. The troupe of actors directed by Moreno had no scripts; they improvised scenes based on events drawn from the daily newspaper or topics suggested by the audience. Occasionally, people in the audience were invited to react to these scenes and come up and demonstrate how they might have played one or another of the roles differently. Moreno found that both the actors and the audience members experienced a psychological release of pent-up feelings (catharsis) as a result. The Theater of Spontaneity led him to develop the group methods and specialized therapeutic techniques that in the mid-1930s evolved into psychodrama.

Psychodrama allows group members to play various roles and to receive feedback about the impact of their portrayals. The techniques of psychodrama encourage people to express themselves more fully, explore both intrapsychic conflicts and interpersonal problems, get constructive feedback on how they come across to others, reduce feelings of isolation, and experiment with novel ways of approaching significant others in their lives. This approach certainly helps to enliven group interactions. Zerka Moreno (1983) writes that “psychodrama represents a major turning point away from the treatment of the individual in isolation and toward the treatment of the individual in groups, from treatment by verbal methods toward treatment by action methods” (p. 158).

## Key Concepts

### Creativity

Moreno was unique in his belief that a major function of the therapeutic process is to promote the client’s creativity in coping with life. Creativity often emerges best not from careful, reasoned planning but as surges of inspired action, and creativity is often generated through active experimentation (Blatner, 2001). Psychodrama aims at fostering creativity in the individual, the group, and ultimately in the culture as a whole. Psychodrama entails the idea that each person is responsible for becoming more creative and for promoting creativity in others (Blatner, 2000).

### Spontaneity

People with problems require stimulation of their creativity, and the best way to achieve this is through a method that promotes spontaneity. Moreno made spontaneity his second most important concept, and it stands out because, in fact, so many of life’s activities, and even some aspects of therapy, tend to inhibit spontaneity. Moreno sought to reverse this trend by creating contexts and activities that would maximize the courage to improvise.

From Moreno’s perspective, **spontaneity** is an adequate response to a new situation or a novel response to an old situation. Spontaneity should not be thought of as impulsive behavior or as a license to act out; spontaneity involves reflection and gives people the ability to act according to the situations they face. Instead of encountering a new situation with anxiety, spontaneity fosters a sense of being capable of approaching a challenging situation (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000).

One of Moreno’s best insights is that creativity and spontaneity can be catalyzed through improvisational involvement. He observed that children, in contrast to adults, were relatively more able to enter into role-playing and fantasy situations and to express their feelings freely. As people grow older, they tend to become less and less spontaneous. To remedy this tendency, Moreno developed methods for training spontaneity aimed at freeing people from limiting “scripts” and rigid and stereotyped responses. He considered spontaneity training to be a prime way of enabling people to meet new situations from a fresh perspective.

It is important to create a climate that will facilitate the unfolding of spontaneity—part of an activity that Moreno called “warming up.” People cannot effectively be pushed into “being spontaneous,” and spontaneity does not imply impulsivity. Perhaps the most important way to facilitate spontaneity in group members is for the group leader to model spontaneous behavior and a sense of playfulness. To be able to create a climate that fosters the development of spontaneity and playfulness, group practitioners must be aware of their own feelings and draw upon them in intuitive ways. In psychodrama, play is recognized as a valid need, a part of health, so that people can enjoy a wider range of experiences than they might in everyday life. Play involves imagination, creativity, spontaneity, and self-expression (Blatner & Blatner, 1997).

### **Working in the Present Moment**

Working in the present moment is a concept closely related to creativity and spontaneity. Pioneered by Moreno years before it became fashionable, action in the “here-and-now” is an important element of psychodrama. People subconsciously, defensively distance themselves from their involvement in problems by thinking of them in the past. Psychodrama counters this tendency by encouraging participants to become involved in the immediacy of the issues and events. Clients enact conflicts in psychodrama “as if” they were occurring in the present moment rather than just narrating past events.

Psychodrama directors will often say to members, “Don’t tell us, show us.” A basic tenet of psychodrama is that reliving and reexperiencing a scene from the past gives the participants both the opportunity to examine how that event affected them at the time it occurred and a chance to deal differently with the event *now*. By replaying a past event “as if” it were happening in the present, the individual is able to assign new meaning to it. Through this process, the client works through unfinished business and reframes that earlier situation.

Psychodrama can deal with a present conflict: “Show us the conflict you are now experiencing between staying in college versus quitting.” And psychodrama enables members to bring the future into the now: “Show us how you’d like to be able to talk with your partner one year from now.” The past, present, and future are all significant tenses, yet the action is played out in the present moment. When members engage in *showing others* what they are thinking or feeling, they move toward concrete experiencing and cut through defenses. They also move away from abstract and intellectual discussions about a topic when they plunge into personal enactment of a concern.

### **Encounter**

The underlying goals of immediacy and involvement were further supported when Moreno taught the principle of encounter, which he started writing about in 1914, long before the encounter group movement began in the 1960s. The **encounter** is that which occurs when individuals connect with one another in a meaningful way in an enactment. This encounter

occurs in the context of the here-and-now, regardless of whether the enactment relates to a past event or to an anticipated future event. It involves a great degree of both directness of communication and self-disclosure. There is great power in encountering. Even when done only symbolically in the form of role playing, it is still more effective than merely reporting an incident.

In addition to directness of self-expression, Moreno envisioned an ideal encounter as involving both parties opening their minds and hearts to the viewpoint of each other through role reversal, imagining what it might be like to be in the other's predicament. Encountering is at the very core of psychodrama; through this process people not only meet but also understand one another on a deep and significant level.

### **Tele**

In the spirit of promoting an increased level of interpersonal freedom and spontaneity, Moreno pioneered the use of "sociometry," a method whereby people could be helped to more consciously recognize and choose their relationships. *Tele* is what is measured by sociometry, which involves the degrees of preference a member has toward others. The concept of tele (tay-lay) is derived from the Greek root for "action at a distance." It represents the basic tone associated with our interpersonal connections. J. L. Moreno (1964) defines **tele** as the two-way flow of feelings between people. He calls it a "feeling of individuals into one another, the cement which holds groups together" (p. xi). Tele is a therapeutic factor related to change that promotes healing through a reciprocal empathic feeling. People naturally, or for not-so-obvious reasons, feel attracted to certain people and are repelled by others. When positive tele is reciprocated, it is sometimes called "rapport." When negative tele is reciprocated, it may be called "bad vibes." The level of positive tele in a group correlates with its cohesiveness.

### **Surplus Reality**

Psychotherapy is about helping people to become more conscious of their deeper attitudes and motives, and sometimes it helps to bring unspoken and unfulfilled fantasies into explicit awareness. Instead of talking only about what actually happened or what might in fact yet occur, it is often more important to help the client become clear about what was hoped for or feared, even if it is not realistic. Psychodrama includes the portrayal of such scenes, and Moreno gave the name **surplus reality** to these enactments that reflect the psychological world of the client apart from any concern for the limits of ordinary reality. Surplus reality is more than a clinical technique; it is a philosophical attitude toward life (Moreno, Blomkvist, & Rutzel, 2000).

These concrete expressions of the imagination enable psychotherapeutic exploration of dimensions of events that do not occur in actuality. Therapists often ask clients questions such as these: "What if you could have spoken up?" "What if she hadn't died?" "What if you could have a new mother or father?" In psychodrama this "what if" perspective is made more explicit by being physically enacted in the present, going beyond

the limits of being realistic to acknowledge the way emotions work in the realm of “what could have been *if only* \_\_\_\_\_.” For example, a son can talk to a father who died before they had a chance to say good-bye to each other. A woman can encounter her wiser self from 20 years in the future. A man can go back and experience the perfect seventh birthday to counter memories of what had been a humiliating or disappointing actual event. Using surplus reality, individuals can encounter lost others to talk out previously unexpressed emotions and ask and answer questions. Surplus reality can also be used to replay an unfortunate or even traumatic event so that the individual experiences a more empowered or satisfactory ending.

Moreno called psychodrama a “theater of truth” because the most poignant and central truths in the minds and hearts of people often go beyond ordinary reality and involve the extra dimension of what could have been or what might have happened if things were different. Helping clients to become conscious of their own repressed emotions and implicit beliefs and attitudes requires a context that evokes spontaneous responses and bypasses tendencies to defend oneself through verbal distancing, narration, describing circumstances, and explaining. All these are forgotten when the protagonist engages in a direct encounter with another.

Using surplus reality, clients are helped to discover viewpoints they had not otherwise entertained. Alternative basic assumptions can then be considered from a different perspective. Psychodrama offers a way for clients to express and reflect on their hopes, fears, expectations, unexpressed resentments, projections, internalizations, and judgmental attitudes. Clients are assisted in ventilating these feelings and are able to symbolically live through them. They are generally encouraged to maximize all expression, action, and verbal communication rather than to reduce it (Z. T. Moreno, 1965). The stage offers a way to symbolically live through so much that ordinarily remains suppressed in life, to maximize rather than dampen expression and action in the service of becoming more self-aware.

### **Catharsis and Insight**

Although psychodrama has been considered a therapy that works because of the catharsis it engenders, this may be somewhat misleading. It isn't always necessary for therapists to press for catharsis itself. Indeed, in many enactments this may even be contraindicated. However, when an individual needs to rediscover repressed emotions, techniques that facilitate this reconnection of conscious and unconscious functions tend to evoke catharsis just as exercising tends to evoke sweat.

People tend to compartmentalize their emotions and attitudes, a main function of most ego-defense mechanisms. When these complexes reconnect, emotions tend to be released—tears, laughter, anger, vulnerability, guilt, hope—and this is the **catharsis** that often accompanies the experiential aspect of therapy. Catharsis is a natural part of the psychodramatic process, but it is not in itself a goal. Rather, it serves as an indicator of emotional expansion and integration.

Blatner (2000) suggests that dramatic emotional releases should not become the exclusive focus of psychodrama, for subtle and gentle catharses can also result in healing: "Abreaction is not enough. People need to carry forward the healing into other levels" (p. 114). Simply rediscovering buried emotions will not bring about healing; these feelings must be worked with for integration to occur. For those who have lost awareness of the roots of their feelings, emotional release may lead to insight, or to an increased awareness of a problem situation.

**Insight** is the cognitive shift that connects awareness of various emotional experiences with some meaningful narrative or some growing understanding. Insight adds a degree of understanding to the catharsis. There are times in psychodrama when it is inappropriate to have protagonists verbalize their insight explicitly. The experience itself often provides sufficient "action insight." At other times, protagonists are helped to find the words that express their feelings through the use of various psychodramatic techniques and so achieve insight in this fashion. Or insight might occur following the enactment when others in the group are sharing with the protagonist their own feelings and reactions to what happened on the stage. Often the other players (auxiliaries) and audience members also experience varying degrees of insight regarding their own life situations.

### **Reality Testing**

The psychodramatic group offers an opportunity to find out how others feel and what the results of certain behaviors might be. The group is like a laboratory in that there is a protected context of "as if," which allows for unfinished business to be explored. This offers a relatively safe setting for **reality testing**, or trying out behaviors that may not generally be socially acceptable in "real life" situations.

For example, a young woman is in great emotional pain over what she sees as her father's indifference to her and the ways in which he has passed up opportunities to demonstrate whatever love he has for her. After concluding a psychodramatic enactment in which the young woman "tells" her father of her feelings of missing this love, she may still be angry with him and expect him to make the first move to change matters. During the discussion phase, the leader or the members can point out that she is making the assumption that he must be the person to initiate a closer relationship. In reality, the father may well be fearful of showing her affection and attention, thinking that she is not interested in such a relationship with him. The group can be instrumental in helping her see that she may have to make the first move if she wants to change her relationship with him. Then psychodrama can again be used as a reenactment for her to practice this new approach, which will facilitate translating insight into action. This enactment maximizes the process of interpersonal learning.

### **Role Theory**

In the 1930s Moreno was one of the originators of social role theory, a way of thinking

and talking about psychological phenomena that has many practical implications. Using psychodrama, we can examine the roles we play, renegotiate them, and choose different ways to play these roles. In psychodrama members are given the freedom to try out a diversity of roles, thereby getting a sharper focus on parts of themselves that they would like to present to others. Playing roles also enables participants to get in contact with parts of themselves that they were not aware of. They can challenge stereotyped ways of responding to people and break out of behaving within a rigid pattern, creating new dimensions of themselves.

Moreno's **role theory** taught that we are all improvisational actors on the stage of life, creating our parts without scripts. We thus become not only actors but also playwrights. By thinking of our behavior patterns as roles in a drama, we are encouraged to bring a measure of reflection to the task, much as an actor stands back during rehearsal and considers how best to play the role assigned. We can go further and question which roles we want to take on or which roles are to be played out. More than merely performing social roles, we are able to actively modify certain roles. Indeed, we have the capacity to break out of roles when we discover that they no longer serve us.

Role playing, which is largely an extension of psychodrama, involves the sense of "playing with" the role, bringing a measure of creativity to it, refining it, and at times even redefining or radically renegotiating the role. Psychodrama is one way to help people become more conscious and creative in how they play the various roles in their lives.

## **Role and Functions of the Psychodrama Group Leader**

The psychodrama **director** (or main group therapist who facilitates the psychodrama) has a number of roles. According to J. L. Moreno (1964), the director has the role of producer, catalyst/facilitator, and observer/analyzer. Directors help in the selection of the protagonist and then decide which of the special psychodramatic techniques is best suited for the exploration of the person's problem. They organize the psychodrama, play a key role in warming up the group, and pay careful attention to what emerges in the drama. Directors function as catalysts and facilitators in that they assist the protagonist in developing a scene and facilitate the free expression of feelings. Only occasionally will they make therapeutic interpretations to help the protagonist gain a new understanding of a problem.

One of the main skills of the psychodramatist involves appreciating the protagonist's reluctance as insufficient warm-up rather than "resistance." Pushing the protagonist at this point would further reduce spontaneity. Instead, the director works to bring into explicit expression those concerns that might induce hesitation, such as a worry that the group might think a given feeling is "weird." The director can then weave these ideas into a supportive exploration with the group, enabling the protagonist to feel an increase in the *tele* with the other group members and thus be ready to courageously disclose yet another facet of his or her inner truth. Blatner (1996) cites Moreno's advice on this issue: "We don't tear down the protagonist's walls; rather, we simply try some of

the handles on the many doors, and see which one opens" (p. 78).

## **The Basic Components of Psychodrama**

Classical psychodrama involves a director, a main player or protagonist, supporting players or auxiliary egos, other group members in the role of audience, a stage, and a number of psychodramatic techniques that are used to further the action.

### **The Protagonist**

The **protagonist** is the person who is the focus of the psychodramatic enactment—the one who presents a problem to be explored. As members interact with each other, a group member may raise an issue. If that person, the therapist, and the group agree that a psychodramatic exploration is warranted, the person for whom the issue is most relevant generally becomes the protagonist of the ensuing psychodrama. The protagonist is the name of the role a person takes on when he or she becomes the focal actor in a psychodrama. This role is assumed voluntarily although it may be suggested by the therapist or by the group. In general, it is important that members feel free to decline to be placed in the position of increased demand for disclosure.

The protagonist selects the event to be explored. He or she, in negotiation with the director, chooses a scene from the past, the future, or an alternative present, and that scene is played as if it is happening in the here-and-now. In the case of a past event, it is not necessary to remember exact words but rather to portray the essential elements as experienced by the protagonist. The protagonist is the source of the imagery but requires the assistance of the director to explore a problem and to create a psychodrama. As soon as possible, the director encourages the protagonist to move spontaneously into action rather than merely talking about the event.

As the protagonist acts out a situation, it is important that he or she have the freedom to explore any aspect of the scene (and related relationships) that seems significant. Although the director may encourage the protagonist to reenact a situation or deal with an anticipated event, the protagonist decides whether he or she is willing to follow the director's suggestions. The protagonist's preferences, readiness for engaging in a given theme, and decisions should be given priority over the director's or the group's desires. If this is done, there is a greater chance that the protagonist will feel supported in going as far as he or she chooses. It is essential to respect the protagonist's process and decisions. Directors function best when they accurately sense and work with the protagonist's flow. Also, the director may employ a particular technique, but protagonists always have the right to say that they don't want to move in that direction. Effective psychodrama never involves coercion; the auxiliaries and the director are there to serve the protagonist.

### **The Auxiliary Egos**



**Auxiliary egos** (often simply called “auxiliary,” “auxiliaries,” or “supporting players”) are those in the group other than the protagonist and the director who take part in the psychodrama, usually by portraying the roles of significant others in the life of the protagonist. These persons may be living or dead, real or imagined. Auxiliaries may also play the roles of inanimate objects, pets, or any emotionally charged object or being that is relevant to the protagonist’s psychodrama.

Zerka Moreno (1987) notes four functions of the auxiliary: (1) to play out the perceptions held by the protagonist, at least in the beginning; (2) to investigate the interaction between the protagonist and their own roles; (3) to interpret this interaction and relationship; and (4) to act as therapeutic guides in helping the protagonist develop an improved relationship. Effective auxiliary egos can give a psychodrama greater power and intensity. A few ways in which they do this are by helping the protagonist warm up, by intensifying the action, and by encouraging the protagonist to become more deeply involved in the here-and-now of the drama.

The protagonist generally selects the group members who will serve as supporting players. These choices are made for both conscious and unconscious reasons. Some choices are made on the basis of characteristics of group members that are perceived as similar to those of the other figures in the scene. When a choice is made on this basis, the interaction between the protagonist and auxiliary egos is likely to be more spontaneous, real, and effective. Directors may make an exception to this rule if they want a group member to assume an auxiliary role with particular therapeutic potential. Although the protagonist has ideas about a problem, both the protagonist and the director have the function of coaching auxiliaries in how to play their roles. This task sometimes entails giving an auxiliary some background on the person he or she is to play and a feeling for the style of that person. Protagonists may teach or coach an auxiliary on how best to portray the behavioral style of a significant other.

The director has the task of assessing whether the auxiliary’s role playing is working more for the protagonist’s benefit or meeting the auxiliary’s needs. In the latter case, the auxiliary may be redirected by the director. The director needs to discuss this development during the sharing phase of the group, because it usually has significant therapeutic implications for the auxiliary. It is important to remember that psychodrama is a *group process* and that auxiliary work has great therapeutic potential. Playing someone else’s role often serves as a vehicle for getting in touch with parts of the self not uncovered while playing one’s own role. At times, it is a good idea to permit auxiliaries some freedom of expression in their role portrayals. This can introduce novel elements that are surprisingly evocative. At other times, the director may help the auxiliary to restrain his or her performance so it fits the protagonist’s perception. Zerka Moreno (1987) warns about possible dangers when the protagonist’s psychodrama and the auxiliary’s drama combine. She cautions both the auxiliary and the director to avoid doing their own psychodrama, thus taking the focus away from the protagonist’s drama.

## **The Audience**

The **audience** includes others in the group before whom the problem is explored. Even group members who are not engaged in the action play a role. As members witness the self-disclosure of others, they function psychologically as a kind of externalized “mirror.” This gives the protagonist the experience of knowing that others share in looking at the world from his or her point of view. The audience also functions in the ongoing improvisational process as the source of people who will volunteer or be chosen to enter the scene as auxiliaries, or as people who will share with the protagonist in an enactment on a future occasion.

Psychodrama benefits the whole group, not just the protagonist. Almost always some group members find a particularly moving resonance in the enactment, identifying with either the protagonist or one of the other roles. Usually, group members feel at least some empathy, and they can experience a release of their own feelings through their identification with others; they thus gain insight into some of their own interpersonal conflicts. These other group members—the audience—provide valuable support and feedback to the protagonist.

## **The Stage**

The **stage** is the area where the enactment takes place. It represents an extension of the life space of the protagonist, and as such it should be large enough to allow for movement of the protagonist, the auxiliary egos, and the director. The stage is generally empty, but it is helpful to have available as props a few chairs, perhaps a table, a variety of pieces of colored fabrics for costuming and other uses, and other items. Props can be used to intensify the dramatic function. When a protagonist emerges from the group, he or she moves to this area to create the psychodrama. In most cases, a special psychodrama stage is not available, but a section of the room can be designated for “as if” action, a dedicated area in which those involved in the action are not expected to be particularly reflective or to function as interactive group members at the same time.

## **Phases of the Psychodrama Process**

Psychodrama consists of three phases: (1) warm-up, (2) action, and (3) sharing and discussion. These phases are not absolute but are general intellectual constructs that help the practitioner build the spontaneity, apply it, and integrate the enactment with the group process.

### **The Warm-Up Phase**

**Warming up** consists of the initial activities required for a gradual increase in involvement and spontaneity. This is aimed at encouraging maximum involvement. It includes the director’s warm-up, establishing trust and group cohesion, identifying a group theme, finding a protagonist, and moving the protagonist onto the stage (Blatner, 1996,

2001). It is essential that participants are helped to get ready for the methods used during the action phase. Such readiness involves being motivated enough to formulate one's goals and feeling secure enough to trust the others in the group. Physical techniques for warming up a group are commonly introduced and may include using music, dancing, and movement or other nonverbal exercises.

Early in a psychodrama certain group members may emerge who appear ready to benefit from an experiential exploration of a problem. It may be an individual's relationship to a personal situation outside of the group or some group members needing to clarify their own interactions within the group. In these instances, the flow of group process serves as a warm-up enactment. In settings in which a psychodrama is to be the primary mode for exploration, the following warm-ups methods have been used:

- The director gives a brief talk about the nature and purpose of psychodrama, and participants are invited to ask questions.
- Each member is briefly interviewed by the director. A lead question may be, "Is there a present or past relationship that you'd like to understand better?" If each person in the group responds to this question, a basis for group cohesion is being established.
- Members can form several sets of dyads and spend a few minutes sharing a conflict that they are experiencing and that they'd like to explore in the session.
- The go-around technique, in which each member is asked to make some brief comments about what he or she is experiencing in the moment, can facilitate group interaction. Making the rounds can also focus members on personal work they would like to do during the session.
- In a long-term group with functional people, a nondirective warm-up is often used to get members ready for a session. Members may be asked to briefly state what they were aware of as they were coming to the session or to make any comments about their readiness to work.

During the warm-up phase, members need to be reassured that the working environment is a safe one, that they are the ones to decide *what* they will reveal and *when* they will reveal it, and that they can stop whenever they want to. The techniques are less important than the spirit and purpose of the warm-up; anything that facilitates the cohesion of the group and establishes trust is a useful tool for the initial phase of a psychodrama.

Blatner (1996) emphasizes the importance of the director's own warm-up as a key factor in creating a climate that encourages spontaneous behavior. It is during the warm-up period that directors are developing their own spontaneity. By communicating a sense of authenticity and warmth, they foster confidence and trust. Similarly, modeling risk taking, self-disclosure, humor, spontaneity, creativity, empathy, and the acceptability of expressing emotions and acting them out contributes to the group's cohesion. A theme may begin to emerge, and a protagonist may be selected and move onto the stage for action.

## The Action Phase

The **action phase** includes the enactment and working through of a past or present situation or of an anticipated event. The goal of this phase is to assist members in bringing out underlying thoughts, attitudes, and feelings of which they are not fully aware. It is useful to facilitate the process so that the protagonist can move into action as soon as possible. In doing this, the leader can draw on important cues that the protagonist gave in presenting his or her situation, including facial expressions, figures of speech, and body posture. The director helps the protagonist get a clear focus on a particular concern. Rather than having the protagonist give lengthy details and risk losing the energy of the psychodrama, the director can ask the protagonist focusing questions or make statements such as these:

- With whom in your life are you having the most trouble at this time? [Pick the one with whom you need to do some work. Show us a scene.]
- Be your father [mother]. What would he [she] typically say to you? [Show us a scene.]
- Show us how you would want to respond to your mother [father].
- Show us a scene of how you'd like your partner to behave.
- Give us a few lines you'd like your son to hear.
- Tell us what you would most like to hear from your daughter.

The point of these interventions is to avoid commentaries and instead to plunge the protagonist back into a direct encounter and to try out alternative approaches in action.

Once the protagonist has a clear sense of what he or she would like to explore, it is possible to create the scene and coach the auxiliary egos. After this focusing process, protagonists act out their problems and relationships on the stage. A single action phase may consist of one to several scenes. Scenes are constructed and enacted as they relate to the protagonist's issues. They may be interpersonal or intrapersonal in nature and usually progress from peripheral issues (presenting problems) to more central issues (the real or deeper problems). For example, if a member identifies a time when she felt abandoned, the leader might say: "Let's do a scene of an earlier time when you felt isolated and abandoned. Let's set it up." The enactment would then follow. At the end of a scene the protagonist or the director may suggest that the protagonist assume a different role in the same scene to determine whether he or she can respond more effectively. Another suggestion is that the protagonist fantasize about the future by acting out how things might be a year afterward, thus sharing private thoughts with the audience. The duration of the action phase varies and depends on the director's evaluation of the protagonist's involvement and on the level of involvement of the group.

At times most of a session may be devoted to the group as a whole working through interpersonal issues among members. At other times a common theme such as loneliness, fear of intimacy, or feelings of rejection seems to touch everyone in the group. With skillful facilitation by the group leader, the work of many group members can be linked and a common theme can be pursued.

At the end of the action phase, it is important to help protagonists acquire a sense of closure for any work they have accomplished. One useful way to facilitate closure is to arrange for **behavioral practice** to help the protagonist translate group learning to everyday life. The function of behavioral practice is to create a climate that allows for experimentation with a variety of new behaviors. Later the person can implement some of these new behaviors with significant others outside the group and cope with situations more effectively. To facilitate behavioral practice, the protagonist presents the situation as it was originally presented in the action stage. Various techniques, such as role reversal, future projection, mirroring, and feedback, are often used to help the protagonist get a clearer idea of the impact of his or her new behavior. (These techniques are described later in the chapter.)

### **The Sharing and Discussion Phase**

The third phase of psychodrama involves sharing and discussion. Sharing, which comes first, consists of nonjudgmental statements about oneself; a discussion of the group process follows. After a scene is enacted, the psychodrama leader invites all the group members to express how the enactment affected them personally. Those who took roles as auxiliaries may share in two ways. First, they may be encouraged to share what they found themselves feeling or thinking in their roles. Second, they can de-role further and share something from their own life that was touched by the enactment.

Zerka Moreno (Moreno et al., 2000) believes that both members and leaders need to be taught to have an open heart, not just a head. Sharing is a deeply personal process, not a cognitive reflection, and Moreno has some excellent guidelines for making the sharing session a therapeutic experience:

- Group members should not offer advice or analysis to the protagonist but instead talk about themselves and how they were affected by the enactment.
- The protagonist has engaged in open sharing, and he or she deserves more than an analysis or critique.
- Sharing has healing effects. The disclosure of others' experiences gives people a sense that they are not alone and leads to bonding.
- Interpretation and evaluation come later, when the protagonist is not so vulnerable.

During the sharing phase of psychodrama, the director's function is to initiate and lead a discussion that includes as many participants as possible to maximize feedback. The sharing phase gives all the members in a psychodrama group the chance to express their feelings. It is important that protagonists be given an opportunity for some form of closure of their experience. If they have opened themselves up and expressed deep feelings, they need to be able to count on the support of the group to integrate through sharing and some exploration of the meaning of the experience. If no such opportunity is available, protagonists may leave the session feeling rejected and lost instead of feeling freer and more purposeful.

The director must reinforce the kind of sharing that entails self-disclosure, support, and emotional involvement on the part of the members. The sharing is best structured so that members discuss how they were affected by the session, and in this way their own involvement, transparency, and growth are fostered. If participants attempt to analyze or to provide solutions, the director needs to intervene.

Sharing has another use for the director, especially in ongoing groups. New information group members reveal should be noted because this might well become the source for further therapeutic exploration, which the director could use with the relevant person's prior permission. During the sharing time, group cohesion is typically increased, for members are able to see commonalities. The participation in universal struggles is a way for members to bond; after effectively sharing experiences, protagonists are not left feeling as though they are alone in an unfriendly universe. They have a basis for feeling accepted, and the feedback from other members acts as a reinforcement for them to continue revealing personal concerns.

Leveton (2001) stresses the importance of the director in helping the protagonist, auxiliaries, and other members find closure after a piece of work. **Closure** does not necessarily mean that a concern is resolved, but all who were involved in a psychodrama should have an opportunity to talk about how they were affected and what they learned. A key aspect of closure is the process of shedding the roles (debriefing) of protagonist and auxiliaries.

Closure depends on the client, the situation, and the group. The length of the session, the degree of cohesion, and the intensity of the work are other factors that determine what kind of closure is appropriate. If the group will not meet again, closure is essential; if the group meets on a regular basis, however, there might be times when the leader will defer closure to a later session. A period of discussion can be useful for "winding down" the emotional pitch to a more cognitive level and for helping the protagonist and the audience integrate key aspects of the session.

Although the emotional aspects of an enactment are of great therapeutic value, a degree of cognitive integration will maximize the value of the emotional components. Protagonists can be asked to express what they have learned from the particular enactment and the insights they have acquired. It is also a good practice to encourage protagonists to talk about the personal meaning of reliving a situation. They can be stimulated to think of a possible course of action that will permit them to cope with repressed feelings and of practical ways of dealing more effectively with similar problem situations in the future.

Before ending a session, the director typically encourages members to verbalize any unspoken feelings that have developed during the psychodrama. As mentioned earlier, it is not always necessary to work things out, but it is important that the existence of unfinished business be mentioned before the session closes. Some problems will probably be opened up and fruitfully explored, yet the protagonist may be far from having resolved

the issue. After a successful sharing session, new work is likely to be shaping up as other members identify with what they just experienced. Of course, it is not wise to undertake further work in a given session if there is not ample time to address the issue adequately.

Members need to be warned of the danger of attempting premature and forced closure of an issue. It is essential that protagonists have ample opportunities to express their feelings, experience their conflicts, and explore the meaning of their emotional release. Clinicians, out of their own anxiety for wanting to see problems solved, sometimes suggest behavioral practice and an action plan before members have had a chance to ventilate and identify an area of personal concern.

Leveton (2001) notes that some practitioners expect perfection. Unless everything is settled, these leaders feel that they have failed. To avoid such feelings, they may try to force closure in situations where participants are better off if they continue reflecting on what has occurred. One of the most challenging tasks for the director is learning to bring closure to a session without curtailing members' further self-exploration, which is necessary for an in-depth resolution of their problems.

## **Application: Therapeutic Techniques and Procedures**

Psychodrama uses a number of specific techniques designed to intensify feelings, clarify confusions and implicit beliefs, increase insight and self-awareness, and practice new behaviors. These techniques should be used for specific purposes related to what the protagonist and other group members need to experience to optimize relearning. Drama itself is not the goal (J. L. Moreno, 1978).

Blatner (2001) points out that **classical psychodrama** is a powerful approach that requires specialized training on the director's part, adequate time for orientation and follow-up, a supportive group atmosphere, and members who are appropriate for these methods. For those who do not practice classical psychodrama, many small role-playing enactments using some of the principles and techniques described later can be integrated with other approaches discussed in this book. Psychodrama is an integrative approach that provides a context for applying its methods in a variety of therapeutic group settings (such as outpatient clinics, inpatient units, residential treatment centers, and private practice). Psychodrama methods can also be applied in groups designed for training counselors.

Directors have latitude to invent their own techniques or to modify standard psychodramatic ones. It is of the utmost importance that group leaders bring caution and commitment to the practice of their technical skills, and they need to know when and how to apply these methods. Effective psychodrama consists of far more than the mere use of certain techniques. Practitioners must learn to know, and work with, the members' psychological worlds in an educated, trained, sensitive, caring, and creative manner. The techniques mentioned here are described in detail in the following sources: Blatner (1996, 1999), Blatner and Blatner (1997), Leveton (2001), J. L. Moreno (1964), J. L. Moreno and Moreno (1958), Z. T. Moreno (1959, 1965, 1983, 1987), and Moreno, Blomkvist,

and Rutzel (2000).

Some principles of psychodramatic techniques serve as useful guidelines for the practitioner (Blatner, 2000, pp. 227–228):

- Whenever possible, use physical action rather than talking about a situation.
- Promote authentic encounters as much as possible. Group members should speak directly to each other rather than explaining to the director.
- Look for ways to promote the active behavior of other members by getting them involved in an enactment as much as possible.
- Make abstract situations more concrete by working with specific scenes.
- Encourage participants to make affirmative statements about themselves by using sentences beginning with “I.”
- Encourage members to deal with situations in the past or the future as if they were happening in the present moment.
- Recognize and tap the potential for redecisions, renegotiations, and corrective experiences in the present.
- Pay attention to the nonverbal aspects of communication.
- Work toward increasing levels of self-disclosure and honesty.
- When appropriate, weave in a degree of playfulness, humor, and spontaneity in a situation.
- Utilize symbols and metaphors, personifying them and making them more vivid.
- Include other artistic principles and vehicles, such as movement, staging, lighting, props, poetry, art, and music.
- Exaggerate or amplify behavior to explore a wider range of responses.
- Recognize and use the warming-up process as a prelude to facilitating creative and spontaneous behavior.
- Utilize the therapeutic factors of a group.
- Integrate psychodrama with other therapeutic approaches and the creative arts.

### **Self-Presentation**

In the **self-presentation** technique, the protagonist gives a self-portrait to introduce the situation. Let us say that in the group Jack wants to explore his relationship with his daughter, Laura. The group is interested in this and wants to have it enacted. The director (group leader) has Jack stand up and come onto the stage area, and they begin to establish a scene in which Jack interacts with Laura. Jack picks someone from the group to be the auxiliary playing his daughter. Jack states the problem as he sees it, and the director helps to translate the narrative into an action so that “talking about” becomes “show us how you and your daughter interact.”

### **Role Reversal**

**Role reversal**, considered one of the most powerful tools of psychodrama, involves looking at oneself through another individual’s eyes. In role reversal the protagonist takes



on the part of another personality portrayed in his or her drama. For example, the father can play the daughter's part, while the daughter plays the father. Through role reversal, people are able to get outside of their own frame of reference and enact a side of themselves they would rarely show to others (Moreno et al., 2000). Once an enactment is set up, the director may wish to have the protagonist use this technique (1) to better portray how he or she imagines or remembers the other personality and (2) to reach a fuller understanding of the viewpoint or situation of the other. Through reversing roles with a key person in his or her psychodrama, the protagonist is able to formulate significant emotional and cognitive insights into the situation of others. This technique builds empathy with others.

In setting a scene, the auxiliary ego chosen to play a particular part (mother, father, sibling, lover, close friend, teacher, or relative) does not know how to enact either the nonverbal or the verbal components of the assigned role. The protagonist is asked to reverse roles to demonstrate this. As the scene unfolds, if the auxiliary ego begins to take the role in a direction that does not apply to the protagonist, the director can again invite a role reversal so that the auxiliary can get back on track. The leader needs to intervene to reduce the chances that the auxiliary will contaminate the process with his or her own dynamics. The auxiliary is instructed to keep the drama true to the protagonist's perception of events.

The second and more important function of role reversal is to encourage protagonists to empathize with a significant person in their life. In assuming the role of that person in the psychodrama, they begin to develop a deeper appreciation for the person's world. This reversal allows them to experience the environment from a different perspective. Typically, the director suggests a role reversal when it appears that the protagonist would benefit by attempting to "walk in the shoes" of the person with whom he or she is experiencing conflict. The art of this technique lies in the director's ability to warm up the protagonist as if he or she were the other person (Blatner, 2005b).

Zerka Moreno (1983) makes the point that protagonists must act out the truth as they feel it and from their own subjective stance, regardless of how distorted their presentation may appear to the other members or the leader. For example, Jack presents his daughter, Laura. Preferably, he plays the role of Laura and demonstrates how she typically responds. As Jack "becomes" his daughter, another member can assume the role of Jack as father. By playing the role of Laura as he experiences her, Jack may begin to come to a clearer understanding of how she feels. To warm the protagonist up to this role shift, the director can interview Jack as he plays the role of his daughter. This technique also gives the director and the group a clearer picture of how Jack perceives his daughter and how he thinks she perceives him.

Zerka Moreno (1983) maintains that this technique encourages maximum expression in conflict situations. Protagonists' distortions of these relationships can be brought to the surface, explored, and corrected in action. First, clients must "own" their emotions through ventilation, or catharsis. Then, by reversing roles, protagonists can

reintegrate, redigest, and grow beyond situations that constrain them. Role reversal allows members to fully express their perceptions of reality, to get feedback from others in the group about their subjective views, and to make modifications of their perceptions to the extent that they discover distortions. It can be used throughout the drama to correct or modify the principal auxiliary's role portrayal and to present additional information to the auxiliary.

Role reversal is a useful psychodramatic technique that has many applications outside of group work. For example, it can be applied to supervision and can enable trainees to get an experiential sense of what it is like to be one of their "difficult clients."

### **Double**

The **double** involves an auxiliary playing a special role—that of the protagonist's "inner self." The double represents another part of the protagonist by expressing the thoughts and feelings that might otherwise go unexpressed. Doubling performs the function of the "voice over" in cinema or television. The double stands to the side of the protagonist (so as to be able to see and mirror the protagonist's nonverbal communications and yet not intrude on the protagonist's perceptual field) and says the words that aren't being spoken. The director may introduce the technique by saying: "This is your double. If she says what you're thinking, repeat it. If it's not what you're thinking, correct it." It is often wise to ask the protagonist if he or she wants a double. It is important that the protagonist accept the double. Then, as the encounter proceeds, the director might ask: "Is this double right for you? Is this what you are trying to express?" Doing this empowers the protagonist. Even if the protagonist wants someone to stand in as a double, it is important that the double not overwhelm or take over for the protagonist (Moreno et al., 2000).

As an auxiliary, the double assists with the specific job of finding a part of the protagonist that is below the surface. Doubling is not an avenue for the venting of the double's emotions unless the emotional expression fits for the protagonist. The double needs to pay close attention to cues given by the protagonist and to follow the lead of the protagonist rather than doing the leading (Leveton, 2001).

Doubling is aimed at expressing preconscious, not unconscious, material and facilitating the client's awareness of internal processes, which often leads to an expression of unvoiced thoughts and feelings. The double also acts as a support of the protagonist and as a link between the director and the protagonist. Once an alliance is developed between the double and the protagonist, the director may coach the double to insert some mild provocations or confrontive statements as a way of facilitating expression of feeling and the clarification process. The double may serve an integrative function and also intensify the interaction between the protagonist and the auxiliary ego. It is useful for doubles to assume both the posture and the attitude of protagonists. However, these are merely tools that doubles use to help them fulfill their purpose. The purpose is to help protagonists increase their awareness of inner conflicts and repressed feelings and even express them.

The double attends to process events and the immediate moment and is available to the protagonist in role reversals and in other roles. Effective doubling often results in the escalation of an interaction, and it is likely to provide the protagonist with the needed catalyst to say things that until now have remained unexpressed.

**Multiple doubles** may be used to represent and embody the various sides of the protagonist. They can represent the protagonist's different conflicting sides or various roles he or she plays in life. With Jack, one double may represent the side of him that misses his daughter and wants to express love, and the other double can be the "cold father" who really wants to have nothing to do with her. The doubles may speak at the same time, or they may take turns. If the doubles are effective, the father's ambivalent feelings toward his daughter can be successfully portrayed on the stage, and Jack may come to see which side within him is stronger. Also, he may get a clearer picture of the feelings and attitudes he'd like to express to Laura.

### **Soliloquy**

At times protagonists are asked to imagine themselves in a place alone where they can think out loud (soliloquize). The director may ask a protagonist to stop the action at some point, turn aside, and express her feelings at the moment. Or the director, on sensing ambivalence on the part of another protagonist, may stop the action and ask him to walk around the stage and say what he is thinking and feeling. Or the protagonist may be engaged in a solitary activity, such as walking home. As a variation, the protagonist may soliloquize by having an inner dialogue with a double as the two walk together.

Like the doubling technique, **soliloquy** facilitates an open expression of what the protagonist may be thinking and feeling but not verbally expressing. For example, Jack may be asked to verbalize his thoughts during the course of a role reversal. This soliloquy gives him the chance to get a sense of what he believes Laura is thinking and feeling but perhaps not expressing directly.

### **The Empty Chair**

Jacob Moreno originated the **empty chair** technique and suggested this procedure to Rosemary Lippitt, calling it the *auxiliary chair* technique (see Lippitt, 1958). The empty chair technique was later incorporated into Gestalt therapy by Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy. The empty chair can be a useful technique when a psychodrama involves someone who is absent or who is dead. A group member, Adeline, can put her mother, who suddenly died, in the empty chair. Adeline can tell her mother what she meant to her and say many of the things that she did not get a chance to let her know before her death. During this time the director might sit or stand next to Adeline for support, or another member with a similar issue could be next to Adeline. A variation of this technique involves an extension of role reversal. Here Adeline is asked to sit in the empty chair, "become her mother," and speak to Adeline. This role reversal gives Adeline a chance to

verbalize what she would like to have heard from her mother. In this way the empty chair technique can serve as a way to complete unfinished emotional work (Leveton, 2001).

### **Replay**

One obvious technique, used widely in musical or dramatic rehearsals, is that of simply redoing an action—refining it, replaying it with more expressiveness, or varying it in some other fashion. If you make a mistake, you might simply say, “That didn’t work well enough. May I please do it over?” In psychodrama the **replay** technique may be used to accentuate the sense of awareness in an action, to intensify the sense of ownership and responsibility, or to broaden the protagonist’s role repertoire. Replay is a fundamental technique has been modified and used in other approaches, especially in behavior therapy and Gestalt therapy.

### **Mirror Technique**

The **mirror** technique is aimed at fostering self-reflection. It involves another member mirroring the protagonist’s postures, gestures, and words as they appeared in the enactment. If Jack observes his own behavior as reflected by another person, he can see himself as others do. It is as if Jack had access to a live equivalent of videotape playback. This process may help Jack develop a more accurate and objective self-assessment. The feedback for protagonists may help them come to understand discrepancies between their self-perception and what they communicate of themselves to others. Blatner (2000) cautions that mirroring can be a powerful confrontation technique and must be used with discretion. It must be given in the spirit of concern and empathy rather than making the protagonist the object of ridicule.

### **Future Projection**

The technique of **future projection** is designed to help group members express and clarify concerns they have about the future. In future projection, an anticipated event is brought into the present moment and acted out. These concerns may include wishes and hopes, dreaded fears of tomorrow, and goals that provide some direction to life. Members create a future time and place with selected people, bring this event into the present, and get a new perspective on a problem. Members may act out either a version of the way they hope a given situation will ideally unfold or their version of the most horrible outcome.

Zerka Moreno (1983) contends that the future has typically been a neglected dimension in therapeutic practice. When participants in psychodrama enact anticipated events as though they were taking place in the here-and-now, they achieve an increased awareness of their available options. Rehearsals for future encounters, coupled with constructive and specific feedback, can be of real value to those members who want to develop more effective ways of relating to significant people in their lives.

Once members clarify their hopes for a particular outcome, they are in a better

position to take specific steps that will enable them to achieve the future they desire. To return to the case of Jack, he can be asked to carry on the kind of dialogue with his daughter that he would ideally like one year hence. He may even reverse roles, saying all those things that he hopes she will say to him. He can also project himself forward and tell her how he has acted differently toward her during the previous year. If he gets a clearer sense of the kind of relationship that he would like with her, and if he accepts his own responsibility for the quality of this relationship, he can begin to modify some of the ways in which he approaches his daughter.

### **The Magic Shop**

The magic shop is occasionally used as a warm-up technique and may also be elaborated on throughout the action phase. The basic idea of the **magic shop** technique is that the protagonist must bargain with an auxiliary playing the “storekeeper,” who has the power to grant his or her most pressing wish. This technique may be useful for protagonists who are unclear about what they value, who are confused about their goals, or who have difficulty assigning priorities to their values.

The magic shop technique involves imagining and “creating” a shop that has many bottles and other exotic containers on the various shelves, each containing a different kind of personal quality. These qualities in their imagined containers can be obtained like magic wishes, but only if there is an exchange for some other quality that the protagonist already possesses. This is a powerful technique, but Leveton (2001) indicates that it is of limited use: it must be timed appropriately, and it cannot be repeated very often with the same group.

### **Role Training**

As early as the mid-1930s Moreno developed a major technique of role training, which is now widely used in behavioral group therapy (behavioral rehearsal). Psychodramatic methods aren't used only to bring out emotions or even to foster insight. Sometimes they can be applied in the service of expanding or refining an individual's role repertoire. **Role training** allows a person to experiment with new behaviors in the safety of the group. Protagonists have many opportunities for replaying a scene until they discover a response that fits them personally. They are given support, reinforcement, and feedback on the effectiveness of their new behaviors. As a part of working through a problem, the director typically focuses on acquiring and rehearsing specific interpersonal skills, which are often learned through the modeling of other members.

Participants are likely to be coached and to receive role training in situations such as a job interview, with the aim of learning how to manage their anxiety. Not only can they come into contact with their feelings, but they can also gain insight into behaviors that are likely to impede an effective interview. They can get feedback on the way they present themselves in the interview, and they can practice various behavioral styles to prepare themselves psychologically for what they see as a stressful experience. Members work on

developing and practicing concrete social skills that will help them deal effectively with a range of interpersonal situations.

## Applying Psychodrama With Multicultural Populations

If practitioners take seriously the cautions that have been mentioned in this chapter, psychodrama can make unique contributions in helping ethnically and culturally diverse populations. The method is being used by thousands of professionals worldwide (Blatner, 2005b). Rather than having a mother merely *talk about* her problems in relating to her children, for example, she can take on the roles of her children during therapeutic sessions.

For many people who have English as a second language, psychodrama has some interesting applications. My colleagues and I have often asked group members to speak to a significant other in their native language as they are engaged in a role-playing situation in a group session (Corey, Corey, Callanan, & Russell, 2004). When they do so, their emotions quickly come to the surface. I recall a German-born group member who was speaking in English to her “father” in a role-playing situation. She did this in a detached manner, and what she said had a rehearsed quality to it. We asked her to continue talking to her father, but to speak in German. She did so and was quickly overcome with emotion. It was difficult for her to keep up her defenses against experiencing her intense feelings when she used her native tongue. It was not important for the leaders or the other members to understand the exact words spoken. They could understand the underlying emotional message through the protagonist’s nonverbal cues and tone of voice. After she finished her psychodrama, we asked her to put some English words to what she had been experiencing. She said that speaking in German had vividly brought back early images, which led to a powerful experience of reliving scenes from her childhood. This helped others who did not understand German to be more tuned into her work, and it also helped her put her emotional work into a cognitive perspective. In the DVD program *Groups in Action* (Corey, Corey, & Haynes, 2006), Casey speaks symbolically to her mother in Vietnamese, and through role reversal that is also done in Vietnamese, the mother talks back to Casey. In another group program in the same DVD, Maria speaks to each member in the group about her thoughts and feelings in her first language, which is Spanish. These examples give experiential evidence of the therapeutic value of inviting members to speak in their first language at certain times.

If group members are very uncomfortable in talking about personal issues, let alone displaying their emotions in front of others, psychodrama techniques are most likely not appropriate. However, some of these techniques can be adapted to a problem-solving approach that makes use of cognitive and behavioral principles. It is possible to combine both didactic and experiential methods in structured groups with multicultural populations. All psychodrama techniques do not have to be used to elicit emotions and to encourage members to express and explore their feelings. Role-playing techniques can be productively adapted to structured situations dealing with trying on a new set of specific behaviors.

For those members who have grave cultural injunctions against talking about their family in a group, role playing that involves “talking” to their mother or father will probably be met with reluctance. Before attempting such techniques, the leader should fully explore the clients’ cultural values and any hesitation to participate in certain techniques. This demands a high level of training and skill on the leader’s part. It is easy to see that an untrained and culturally unaware leader could be counterproductive.

## Evaluation of Psychodrama

### Contributions and Strengths of the Approach

The action-oriented methods that have been described in this chapter can be integrated into the framework of other group approaches. Increasing numbers of practitioners are creating their own synthesis of psychodramatic techniques within their theoretical orientation. I value psychodrama’s active techniques and role playing mainly because these methods lead participants to the direct experience of real conflicts to a much greater degree than is the case when members *talk about* themselves in an objective and storytelling manner.

Psychodrama offers a dynamic approach to life’s problems and provides members with alternative ways of coping with their concerns. People often do not see alternatives for dealing with the significant people in their lives. In psychodrama, group members can demonstrate other ways of responding and thus provide the person with different frames of reference.

### Potential for Integration With Other Approaches

Learning about psychodrama is of value because of the many ways in which it can be integrated with other therapies that you will study in this book. Integrated into psychodynamic, humanistic, and cognitive behavioral approaches, psychodrama offers a more experiential process, adding imagery, action, and direct interpersonal encounter. In turn, psychodrama can utilize methods derived from the aforementioned approaches to ground participants in a meaningful process. For example, if a catharsis occurs, the protagonist and group members can work through it more completely.

As was discussed earlier, psychodrama frequently involves catharsis, yet this catharsis is not the goal of psychodrama. Instead, catharsis is a natural product of the process of integration or healing. Emotional ventilation does not in itself heal, but it does help clients become aware of feelings with which they had lost touch (Blatner, 2000). Although there is value in catharsis, my experience with groups has taught me time and again how essential it is to provide a context in which members can come to an understanding of how their bottled-up emotions have affected both themselves and their relationships. J. L. Moreno taught that every emotional catharsis should be followed by a catharsis of integration (Blatner, 2000).

Psychodrama can foster a healing catharsis when that is what is needed, and it can also be a useful force in integrating insights and developing and practicing more effective behaviors. From my perspective, deep personal changes will come about only if members are taught how to transfer what they have learned in their sessions to everyday situations, which is a vital part of psychodrama. It is also critical to teach members how to maintain these positive emotional and behavioral changes. This can be done by helping them plan ways of coping effectively when they meet with frustration in the world and when they regress by seeming to forget the lessons they have learned. An excellent time for this cognitive work and formulation of action plans is toward the end of the sharing session after the psychodrama has been brought to a close. One excellent way to help members achieve closure on some of their emotional issues is to have them begin to think about the meaning of heightened emotional states. They can be encouraged to formulate their own interpretations of their problem situations. Furthermore, they can reflect on how their beliefs and decisions may be contributing to some of the emotional turmoil they reexperienced in the psychodrama.

Although psychodrama can be usefully applied to various types of individual therapy, it is most powerful when used within the group context. Practitioners are challenged to draw on whatever tools will be useful in a given situation. Yet psychodrama is best viewed as an optional set of tools rather than a single approach that in itself can address all of the group members' problems (Blatner, 1996).

In my view, from all the approaches discussed in this book, psychodrama is the most ideally suited for groups. In addition to group therapy, psychodrama can be adapted to individual, couple, and family therapy as well. Variations of psychodrama can work quite well in groups with people of all age groups. Psychodrama techniques can also be readily integrated with most of the other types of therapy covered in this book—Adlerian therapy, transactional analysis, cognitive behavior therapy, multimodal therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, reality therapy, solution-focused therapy, family therapy, and Gestalt therapy, to mention a few. Psychodramatic methods can synergistically enhance techniques from those group approaches that stress a cognitive behavioral orientation.

Keep in mind that the field of psychodrama is characterized by evolution. Psychodrama has continued to develop with significant refinements in theory and practice beyond the seminal work of J. L. Moreno. Zerka Moreno has made significant contributions to psychodramatic methodology, along with scores of other psychodramatists who have added their own significant innovations and applications (Blatner, 1996). For more information on the writings of Zerka Moreno, see Horvatin and Schreiber's (2006) book, *The Quintessential Zerka: Writings by Zerka Moreno on Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy*.

### **Limitations of the Approach**

Blatner (1996) emphasizes that psychodrama is no panacea and that it must be used with good judgment and in a balance with other group therapy skills. Indeed, because



enactment can evoke powerful emotions, therapists need to exercise humility in their commitment to continuing their professional and emotional education and in refining their own skills in the understanding and use of this most valuable method. Although spontaneity is one of the basic concepts of psychodrama, it can be misused. It is imperative that a group leader's spontaneity, inventiveness, and courage to try new techniques be tempered with a measure of caution, respect for the members, and concern for their welfare.

Practitioners who use psychodrama need to exercise caution in working with people who manifest acting-out behaviors and with seriously disturbed individuals. It is critical that leaders have the experience and knowledge to deal with underlying psychopathology. In addition, they must have considerable sensitivity so that they do not push disturbed clients past a point that is therapeutic. It is also important to use good judgment in structuring situations so that members are not likely to open up old wounds without getting some closure to their problems. For example, in exploring memories of people who have experienced PTSD, Hudgins (2002) has developed a complex adaptation of psychodrama that has a number of built in containing techniques to avoid retraumatization.

As with other approaches to psychotherapy, it is important that leaders using the powerful methods of psychodrama also become aware of how their own personal problems and unmet needs might interfere with their professional functioning. In this regard, countertransference issues must be understood and explored before leaders can hope to have a therapeutic impact on the group. For example, some group leaders may easily become impatient with what they perceive as the "slow progress" of clients. Out of their desire to see more immediate results, they may resort to a variety of manipulations designed to stir up emotions for the sake of drama. Group leaders also need to become aware of how they experience, express, and manage intense feelings. If they are uncomfortable with emotions, they are likely to steer members away from expressing their feelings. A continued commitment to the director's own personal development is essential. Becoming aware of countertransference is as relevant in psychodrama as it is in psychoanalysis (Blatner, 1996).

The underlying philosophy of psychodrama is consistent with many of the premises of existential therapy, person-centered therapy, and Gestalt therapy (see Chapters 9, 10, and 11), all of which emphasize understanding and respecting the client's experience and the importance of the therapeutic relationship as a healing factor. Although group counselors who employ psychodramatic methods assume an active and directive role in facilitating a group, these methods will be most effective when the leader maintains the person-centered spirit (Blatner, 1996). Group leaders who are authentic, who are successful in making good contact with members, who are able to be psychologically present, and who exhibit a high level of respect and positive regard for their clients are most effectively able to implement a range of psychodrama techniques. One of the best safeguards for using these techniques appropriately is for a leader's practice to be grounded on a person-centered philosophical foundation.

### **Training as a Safeguard**

To minimize the limitations and potential problems that might be associated with psychodrama, those who practice psychodrama must have the necessary training and supervision in this approach. Leveton (2001) warns about the irresponsible use of psychodramatic procedures. Skilled directors, she says, are willing to devote the time necessary to develop their skills, and they have undergone a training program under the supervision of an experienced clinician. Psychodrama works best with clinicians who are well grounded in professional judgment and open to drawing methods from various approaches. It is important to remember that practitioners can use certain aspects of psychodrama without employing the full classical enactment for many populations.

According to Zerka Moreno (1987), the director's function is complicated and involves a combination of art and science. She contends that it takes approximately 2 years to train a director of classical psychodrama. The more fully the director lives, the better he or she will be able to fulfill the functions demanded in a psychodrama. Orchestrating the many variables in psychodrama is not simply a matter of learning a technique at a weekend workshop. Although some psychodramatic methods can be acquired at a beginning level of competence in this fashion, the skills of an effective psychodramatist require many hundreds of hours of supervision.

Blatner (1996) contends that it is essential that directors have theoretical, technical, and practical knowledge of psychodramatic techniques. To appreciate fully the potential values and risks inherent in these techniques, directors need to have participated in the process of experientially learning these techniques. The training required for full certification as a psychodramatist includes having at least a master's degree in the helping professions and more than 780 hours of didactic and experiential work with supervision. Certification involves an examination based on ethical issues, knowledge of theory and practice, and an observation of the candidate's skills in leading psychodrama (Blatner, 2001).

Students of psychodrama need to experience the process in all available roles: auxiliary ego, audience, director, and especially protagonist. By getting personally involved in the psychodrama process, trainees not only learn a great deal more about themselves but develop sensitivity toward the role of the client. Inept leadership—manifested, for instance, in forcing people into situations with which they are not ready to deal—can have serious negative consequences for the participants. The sensitivity and expertise of the director are crucial if the experience is to be therapeutic.

Group practitioners who are interested in incorporating psychodrama into their style of leadership should realize that they do not have to be perfect in their first attempts to apply its methods. Some beginning group practitioners become overly intimidated when they think about the personal qualities, skills, and knowledge required to effectively carry out the role and functions of a psychodrama leader. With supervised practice, experience

as a member of a psychodramatic group, and specialized training, group practitioners can acquire competence in applying psychodramatic techniques in their groups.

### **Where to Go From Here**

If you are interested in learning more about the practical values and applications of psychodrama, you can make a good beginning by reading about the approach in journals and books. Also, consider seeking out advanced training and supervision and attending reputable workshops where you can experience psychodrama as a group member. Not only will you learn how this approach works in a group, but you will also be able to work on some personal concerns and find new ways of dealing with them.

**The American Society for Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama (ASGPP)** is geared to the needs of professionals who want to learn about the latest developments in the field. It is an interdisciplinary society with members from all of the helping professions. The goals of the organization are to establish standards for specialists in group therapy and psychodrama and to support the exploration of new areas of endeavors in research, practice, teaching, and training. The ASGPP holds national and regional conferences, provides a journal, the *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama, and Sociometry*, and offers a number of membership benefits. For further information, contact them directly:

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The American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy was formed to establish national professional standards in the fields of psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy and to certify qualified professionals on the basis of these standards. Two levels of certification have been established by the board: Certified Practitioner (CP), and Trainer, Educator, and Practitioner (TEP). Applicants must be certified at the first level before becoming eligible for certification at the second. If you are interested in details about certification or if you want a geographic listing of approved trainers, educators, and practitioners in psychodrama, request a copy of the current *Directory of the American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy* from the board:

American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama  
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Psychodrama is practiced by thousands of therapists worldwide, and a number of websites can help you locate training institutes, conferences, books, and other resources. In addition to the resources listed here, check the website of Dr. Adam Blatner for references and a wide variety of papers on psychodrama and psychotherapy. You can download any of the many articles in this website and you can learn about the current practice of psychodrama.

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Zerka Moreno conducts some weekend training sessions in psychodrama in Virginia. For further information contact her or Dr. Jeanne Burger via e-mail.

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**[end chapter 8]**