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This Journal, which is owned and supported by GANZ (Gestalt Australia and New Zealand, Inc), an association of Gestalt practitioners, presents the written exploration of Gestalt concepts within psychotherapy practice, training and supervision. It publishes articles, book reviews and case studies that focus on the discussion of current practices, research, organisational development and dynamics, community development, social and political domains and everyday life. The Journal offers an opportunity to writers to express their passion for and understanding of the Gestalt paradigm. The Journal also invites writing that explores (or even challenges) the use of Gestalt principles within other theories and disciplines. Through theoretical, methodological, practical and experiential approaches, with the rigour of a professional peer reviewed publication, the Journal encourages and fosters the growth and creativity of writers and provides a resource for anyone interested in discovering more about themselves and others through this rich perspective.

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Contributions
We welcome articles, case studies, literature reviews, critiques of theory and methodology, research, senior Gestalt trainee's projects and assignments. All contributions will be peer reviewed twice and will reflect or add to an understanding of Gestalt theory and methodology or practice. *Guidelines for Contributors* can be found in the back pages of the Journal. Further enquiries may be made directly to the Editors. The views and comments expressed by the writers in this journal are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Editors, the Editorial Board or the GANZ council, nor is responsibility taken for the accuracy of statements made by contributors.

Gestalt Journal of Australia & New Zealand

CONTENTS

Using sociodrama to explore and engage with complex thematic metaphors.

Peter Howie

Abstract

This paper presents an application of sociodrama and sociometry in a session at a Gestalt Australia and New Zealand (GANZ) conference. The purpose of this paper is to present and consider the use of these methods in non-problem oriented contexts. The examples in the paper are written in present tense using an annotated narrative style which allows for an explication of the ideas and concepts from sociodrama, sociometry and psychodrama as they arise in the narrative. The paper begins with a brief introduction of the concepts of psychodrama, sociodrama, and sociometry. Then follows an example of a sociodramatic enactment including a group warm-up phase, an enactment phase, and a sharing phase. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the value of this type of process in such a setting.

Introduction

Many powerful and potent techniques for working with groups have become relegated to therapy groups or problem-oriented group settings. In the paper that follows I present an application of sociodrama, a technique for interpersonal and group interaction that was used in a conference session. The sociodrama director, myself, is not a native of the conference culture where the session is being held, instead I am using my expertise to assist a small group of conference participants to explore and engage the imaginal and liminal areas of their conference theme. A short introduction to psychodrama, sociodrama, and sociometry follows with the case example following this thereafter.

The main concepts of psychodrama, sociodrama, and sociometry

Psychodrama is a methodology for stimulating participants to expand

their capacities to think, feel, and act in the moment using a variety of dramatic action techniques. As a consequence of this improved capacity, participants find themselves able to create new and workable solutions to what were old or intractable dilemmas (Carter, 2005). It is most often applied in a group setting with small (4-8) to medium (6 – 20) size groups as group psychotherapy, but works as well in one to one therapy situations (Blatner, 2004). Psychodrama has a number of techniques and philosophies in common with Gestalt therapy such as the empty chair (sometimes called two-chair work) which can also include the empty bed, empty pew, empty crib, or the high chair, etc, along with the concept of the present moment, the here-and-now (Moreno, 1956; Z. T. Moreno, 2006). Psychodrama has, generally, come to be the term given to all of J. L. Moreno's techniques, which also include sociodrama, sociometry, group psychotherapy, and role play and role training.

Sociodrama is a methodology applicable to all sizes of groups, right up to very large groups. I have used it for groups up to 150 people at conferences with good results. It can be used for exploratory and investigatory purposes, or for the purposes of problem solving or teaching. It was conceived and developed by J. L. Moreno in the early twentieth century as a means of creatively working with some of the very difficult inter-group and intercultural dilemmas of that time. Sociodrama is able to address multiple social justice problems, complex inter-group dynamics, and other social factors operating in complex human settings. According to Browne (2005), sociodrama addresses educational, organisational, social justice, and governmental problematic dilemmas to enhance social change. Sprague stated that sociodrama arose from the upheaval and horror of World War I (as cited in Wiener,1997). Moreno wrote that he initially developed sociodrama as an approach to help people overcome some of their own cultural rigidities and produce some collective catharsis to allow room for fresh approaches, responses, and to make room for creativity (Moreno, 1943). Moreno wrote about the area of human relationships as though there was a psychological geography of human society; a real and measurable social structure (Moreno, 1937). Moreno (1953, 1993), made a great attempt to formalise these ideas by the methodological formulation of *sociometry* in his work *Who Shall Survive?* Sociometry is a neologism he created made up of *socio* – relating to society, and *metrum* – measure for the measurement of social relationships. Sociodrama, according to Moreno's conception, is a way of combining sociometry with dramatic processes and

techniques in order to make social change possible (Moreno, 1943). Moreno saw sociodrama as a way to engage people in specific dramatic activities in order to evoke discussions, explorations and role-playing of solutions to conflictual issues (Kellerman, 1998). Sociodrama, as defined by Moreno (1953), starts from within the present audience, in the here and now of the meeting. It is intended to be educational, clarifying and energising to all members, to serve as a stimulus to spontaneity, creativity, love and empathy; as a check and balance for cultural tensions and hostilities arising from local or world-wide events; as a means for social catharsis and integration; and to this end the group process is co-created by the group leader as well as all the participants (Moreno, 1953, p. 88). Sociodrama as a methodology is still in development (Browne, 2005). Because of this, the philosophical foundation of sociodrama has not been extensively formulated and this writing is largely focused on application rather than theory.

For this paper I have adopted Browne's definition of sociodrama as "a learning method that creates deep understanding of the social systems that shape us individually and collectively" (Browne, 2005, p. 9). While the typical sociodramatic group session is three hours in length, it can equally be used in longer and shorter sessions. The following portrayal of a conference session that employs sociodrama shows how sociodramatic methodology can be used in a small-scale action investigation. Within the session, the utilisation of sub-groups and the whole group are investigated through focusing on concretisation, centering on areas of relevant, living, and in-the-moment community interest and concern. Concretisation is the process of using people or objects to construct a representation of some aspect of social or psychic functioning in the workspace provided, of which more is written later.

Case example: Sociodrama applied in a conference environment

The group and its purpose

The group of 14 participants is made up of a mix of advanced Gestalt trainees and therapists and runs for 90 minutes. The time is the last conference session in a 3-day international conference programme. The theme for the conference is *Present at the Edge*. This session is called *Warm-up and the Liminal Space on the Edge*. The participants are from a variety of countries and there is a wide age range and slightly more

female than male participants. Some of the participants are well known to others and all are unknown to me. We sit in a semi-circle with a large work-space before us.

The group warm up

I introduce myself and take no more than a minute to describe what I am planning to do with the group, which is in line with the abstract for the session contained in the conference programme. Not knowing the individuals, or the Gestalt culture very well, I want to make sure my plan for the session is still cogent. My plan was to use the theme of the conference as a form of sociodramatic exploration using concretisation and introducing the concept of warm-up. My concern now is after three days of the theme being used in all manner and variety of ways in the conference, is it still a living force in the group, or is the theme a little past its use by date? Thus I use a sociometric process to concretise all participant responses to a given question at one go. I am going to invite people to organise themselves along an imagined continuum, also called a spectrogram (Kole, 1969). Utilising the idea of a whole group spectrogram permits group members to answer a given question and at the same time to view a snapshot of how the whole group feels about that particular area of concern or interest.

I say to the whole group: "Could you all please imagine a line running through the centre of the room? At this end of the line is where you would stand if you are still really enjoying this theme Present at the Edge." I stand at one end of the imaginary line. I then begin to walk along the imaginary line, taking form beneath me, at different points saying, "You would stand here if there was a *reasonable amount of enjoyment*, stand here if *you can take a bit more but are just about done*, and stand here if you thought *the theme had done its job and its time to move on*. Could you please go and stand where you are in response to the question 'How are you going with the theme?'"

In using language this way, I try to stay neutral about where is the 'best' place to be. This kind of investigation requires a 'mythical' neutral group leader, who is able to ask questions without giving away their own orientation one way or another. At the same time the group leader in these types of spectrograms needs to be able to give permission to answer outside of the main culture present. That might include phrasing the questions in

ways that are slightly provocative. I might have said down one end, "If you are royally sick of the theme come here and commiserate" but in this case I had no inclination that this was required. Members of the whole group quickly take positions, become active in the group process, chat with folks close to them, and notice where others place themselves. Group members are scattered along the line though all are clearly still getting value from the theme. Folks answer for themselves by where they place themselves on the continuum. What each answer means can then be investigated, as even two people at the same point on the continuum may have differing reasons for being there, and consider where 'there is' differently.

I invite one person from an end to inform one person from the other end of the spectrogram as to why they have placed themselves where they have and to then respond. This process has a number of values - it brings the group together; it lets people see how others have interpreted the question; and it makes the process relational and interactive. I ask a person from the other end to explain why they positioned themselves. In effect the whole group is involved.

After having the participants at either end let everyone know what their response means, I invite people to pair up with someone from a different spot and chat together. They discuss their reasons with one another for about 5 minutes. This process allows people to present themselves, their thinking and decision making around where they placed themselves on the spectrogram. As this was about their relationship to the conference theme, *Present at the Edge*, and where they felt themselves to be, currently, I consider this a worthwhile use of time. I feel pleased that my plan is going to be implemented and that the theme for the conference is still paying dividends for all.

I notice that there is an element of playfulness in the group and I appreciate liveliness in a group when I am likely to create situations of challenge, and where I am an unknown quantity. Such playfulness can indicate the emergence of spontaneity in a group. The level of noise and the easy discussions I am hearing indicate that the participants are warming up to the task, which from my point of view is to develop their relationships in a spirit of learning and adventure. Spontaneity, in sociodramatic terms, is the ability to operate in an authentic manner with oneself and with each other in the here and now situation (Browne, 2005). So far, in the conference

generally I have found many people who are prepared to take on challenges and risks and are oriented to being spontaneous, or let's say, new responses.

Concretising the conference theme

As mentioned earlier, concretisation is about 'making things concrete'. It is part of a suite of concepts Moreno developed around his use of the stage in psychodrama to provoke and promote spontaneity amongst group members. Moreno developed the concept of surplus reality, which provides the basis for the work to come.

> *Psychodrama consists not merely of the enactment of episodes, past, present, and future, which are experienced and conceivable within the framework of reality – a frequent misunderstanding. There is in psychodrama a mode of experience, which goes beyond reality, which provides the subject with a new and more extensive experience of reality, a surplus reality ... an enrichment of reality by the investments and extensive use of imagination.* (Moreno, 1965, pp. 212-213).

When I read that the conference theme was *Present at the Edge*, I was immediately struck by its visuality. I imagined an edge, and being present there. I imagined approaching the edge and whether or not the edge brought me presence, or am I trying to remain present at the edge under difficult circumstances. The edge I imagined is very like the top of a cliff edge. What did I imagine is over the edge or beyond the edge? Pictures arose in my mind's eye. As I reflected in this manner I thought it highly likely that people approaching the edge would warm-up in a certain manner, depending on their life circumstances and how they lived in the world. This led me directly to the session outline and the approach I am now using in the session. As I prepared to write the submission for the conference session I imagined people approaching their particular version of an edge and warming-up in a wide variety of ways, and that this might be a valuable sociodramatic exploration. I also imagined that many participants at the session will have a sense of commonality about the theme, and believe that others see or experience the theme in similar ways to them. From long experience, I have found this is rarely the case, and therefore even more worthy of exploration.

Warm-up, as used in the session title, *Warm-up and the Liminal Space*

on the Edge, is a psychodramatic concept that relates to an individual's functioning state in response to the context they are in. It is closely related to preparation, and responsiveness. Warm-up is a conceptual heuristic for determining or measuring an individual's total state of functioning, their state of being, at a moment in time, in the totality of their context. It includes their range of responses, such as their conscious, unconscious, non-conscious, foreground cognitive, background cognitive, conative, affective, emotive, and action responses (Carter, 2011; Clayton & Carter, 2004). These responses are perceived, and more often inferred, through the language a person uses and include their content, timing, tonal modulation, and delivery styles (Bargh, 2013; Blumberg & Hare, 1999; Patterson, 2006; Remocker & Sherwood, 1999; Richmond, McCroskey, & Hickson, 2008; Wickramasekera, 2007). They are also inferred by attendant bodily cues such as where attention is (body positioning, head positioning, gaze direction), body tonus, postures, gestures, other non-verbal factors, skin colour, speed of bodily movements, and the relationships and timing between all these factors (Blatner, 2004; Clayton, 1991, 1993a, 1993b). The capacity to infer another person's warm-up is based on a mixture of depth and breadth of lived experience, coupled with depth and breadth of knowledge about the person being scrutinised, knowledge of relevant cultural factors, and local critical knowledge about the totality of the present context, and the degree of training in noticing the above factors, and being able to use them imaginatively in an inferential process. As can be seen, this concept of warm-up is littered with undefined terms and propositions but, like many ideas used in Gestalt training and practice, it is a concept well understood through oral and experiential training processes in the milieu of psychodrama.

I introduce what I am about to do. I then ask for volunteers to come and be the edge. Folks hesitate for a bit. One or two arise then a few more. Now I have four people whom I ask to be the edge. I have them stand together in about the middle of the large workspace. I ask for a group of people to come and be the area leading to the edge. Another four come out. Then I ask for the final group to come and be 'beyond the edge'. So we have an area leading to the edge, an edge, and an area beyond the edge. "Can you people that are the edge please be the edge. Discuss together what you are as the edge", I say "Be the edge that you are, with all the ideas, fantasies, dreams you have of an edge." They look slightly uncertain and then begin to chat together.

This type of direction is designed to throw the participants into a creative process. Though I have used a seeming query, I am really giving, what is called in psychodrama, a production direction. I am asking these participants to be something they have never been. I have no doubt that they can do it and I have no idea quite how they are going to do it. At the same time I am going to accept whatever they display. I know it will be elements of difference, elements of similarity, and elements of wildness. "You people who are approaching the edge, please get in touch with what it is like for you. What you are warming-up to in yourself as you come closer to the edge. For each one of you, as you approach the edge, discuss together what it is like for you. I do not want you to work out the 'best way' to approach the edge but how you really are, as you approach the edge". This group begins to chat together, immediately. "You who are beyond the edge, allow yourselves to be 'beyond the edge' and relate together what you are, as 'beyond the edge". This group begins to move and discuss matters together.

I leave the groups to discuss things together. In this way they become conscious of what they do and do not imagine what is going on. And at the same time they get to see differing ideas and imaginings from their own. All the participants have a clear response to these creative challenges. Some are full of verve and some are hesitant, some are voluble and some are quietly thoughtful. After less than ten minutes I invite each group to present out loud to the rest of the group their reflections on what they are experiencing and seeing.

"Wow. The edge is drawing me in. It calls to me to come closer," says one participant who is approaching the edge.

"As I approach, I feel slightly daunted. There is a finality to the edge. It is real and it is there," brings in another pointing their finger at the edge.

"As the edge …"

"Please speak as the edge," I ask. This production technique requires the participant to 'be the edge' rather than reporting about the edge or as a mob. This kind of production leads to a deepening of the warm-up for all.

"As the edge I feel noble and like I want people to come to me," expresses someone at the edge.

Another from the edge chimes in, "We are waiting for you. It is all here."

"I am free. I feel so free," someone beyond the edge expresses. I notice she is not moving. So I suggest, "Allow yourself to feel this freedom and

let your body move to the freedom." She begins to move her body allowing her arms to swing gently.

These reflections out loud continue for a time. This process is a form of getting reflections from each part of the sociodramatic system to affect other elements of the system. People respond with wonder, amusement, and wry looks of knowing.

"Ok, thank you," I say after a time. "Could you now go and be a different part of the system – choose individually rather than as a group?" Participants take their time to become a different part of the system. Once there, I repeat the previous instructions. While it is a repetition, people in each position need to be reminded of what they are - people approaching the edge, the edge, or people over the edge. After a time I encourage the reflections, as previously. We then have another iteration where participants take up the part of the system they haven't experienced yet.

As this process continues I am aware that there is a group warm-up, expressed through language, body movements, gestures and orientation, to have the system move, for the individuals and sub-groups to act. I theorise that this is probably as a consequence of the concretisation. People as the system want to act as the system. The edge wants to do the edgy things. The people approaching the edge want to approach and grapple with the edge. And everyone wants to get to being past the edge. The use of what is termed in psychodrama 'action-cues' which is language with an implicit action component such as "As I approach", and "… come to me".

Living the conference theme

With little description of what is coming next, I invite the group to be either the edge or people approaching the edge. The group divides nearly in half. I provide the following directions.

"As yourself now, please allow yourself to approach the edge. Do this in slow-time. Take time for each step. Notice how your body feels, your mind, cognition, feelings, and drives. Notice how you warm-up as you approach the edge. Notice how the edge seems to you and notice how the edge affects you. Move as far or as little as you wish." At this stage I am able to have participants become conscious of their warming-up process

whether it be creative, restrictive, fearful or ebullient.

"As the edge, be the edge, and respond as you do to the people approaching you."

With these two production directions I set the scene for the group members to be themselves and move in relationship to the edge. This is where the theme for this session – warm-up to the edge – is being enacted. What emerges from all the participants is a confluence of their own imagination and responses to others' imaginations. The edge will be a surprise, because the edge is rarely if ever in life what it is expected to be.

Some of the edge try and entice the approaching folks. Some of the edge try and restrict or deflect the approachers. Some of the approaching folk act as through it is their life job to get through the edge. Some of the approaching folks communicate together and encourage each other. Some form relationships with the edge. Everyone seems to want to get past, over, or through the edge. Some take plenty of time to do so. Eventually, some folks get past the edge. They move in different ways from when they were approaching the edge. They look reflective and full. Some move off to be on their own. Some thrill at their experience. Some communicate with others and some simply stay with themselves.

"Notice and experience yourself as you are beyond the edge," I say. "And edge, notice your experience, as they are in this new space."

"I am thrilled they have moved on. That's what I am here for, " chimes in one element of the edge.

"I feel so free. As soon as I moved past the edge I was free, and felt it, and knew it, I can feel it in me." She looks thrilled and oddly at peace.

A number of participants respond from where they are. There is a sense of satisfaction and pleasure in the room as though many people have experienced something that took real effort. This is like the after-time. Some have a more intense experience than others. I do not inquire too far as this can create a movement from feeling into thinking and at present I find the balance about right. I am also aware that shortly I will ask everyone to reverse roles and be the other element of the system. I know this will create a wrench, of sorts. At the same time it is a built in readjustment of participants' emotional states so that, in this time-limited group setting, they

are not required, or likely to, over-engage with the process we are using. However I also have made the assessment that while many are satisfied, many still have an unmet warm-up, called an act hunger in psychodrama, which, in this case, is the desire to be the other element in the system. I take my time. I want to time the production command for when folks are most likely to feel the value of going along with it. While it is called a production command, or direction, it is in reality a request - a strong request, but definitely a request. I am fully prepared to change my mind or assessment at many points. When someone hesitates, I check it out. When someone goes to soon, I check it out. Getting the timing right is always a guess, mixed with experience, with a dash of aesthetic dramatic admixture, and fingers crossed and is really more like an experiment. Every group is different, so every group requires something new and something else. If I get caught up in imagining that I know what is required I can find myself picking a fight with the group members. However when someone says "No!" I take that as the beginning of a negotiation. The "No!" means they do not want to do what I am suggesting. They may have misunderstood what I am suggesting. They may have understood me but want to know why. They may have heard me, and made sense of me but it does not sit well with them. They may use language differently than me. They may be looking after someone else in the group.

So I say, "Please be the other part of the system. If you were approaching the edge please be the edge. If you were the edge please be you approaching the edge." The timing is Ok and many in the group move to do it immediately and others slowly warm-up to my request. We continue …

Reflection at the end

After the second iteration is completed I invite folks back to the half circle we began in. I invite them to let the rest of us in on either the experience they have just had or their reflections on that experience or anything else that they might like to let us know. In psychodrama as well as sociodrama this is called the sharing phase. In business settings this might be called a debriefing. Everyone has had both individual, interpersonal, and whole group experiences, and this is an opportunity to present this to the groups, along with any insights or other realisation that might have occurred. There is a lively sense in the group and an awareness of the imminence of the conference's conclusion. A number of participants briefly share their varying experiences which include:

"I am surprised by what I experienced."

"I realised I was not ready to approach the edge, which makes me wonder …"

"I really needed to move" and…

"I can still feel it in my body."

And we conclude.

In Summary

Using sociodrama, sociometry and psychodrama in non-problem group settings can provide a wide variety of benefits, as this example shows. It allows for the focus of the group to be the group, and group concerns or interests, rather than individuals or individually generated interests. Processes, such as sociodrama, which enter into surplus reality type environments, allow for the rising of liminal states in participants. These liminal states may emerge as a result of being able to communicatively employ non-cognitive understandings and interactions, such as being an edge, along with the literal transposition of participants into 'seeing' the universe from a different perspective, such as being beyond the edge. This use of non-cognitive feelings and expressions from different areas of a system, may greatly enhance explorations in the moment and could well suit community gatherings, planning, research, and teaching sessions.

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Biography

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