Morenean Approaches: Recognizing Psychodrama’s Many Facets

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ABSTRACT. Psychodrama is only one of many approaches developed by J. L. Moreno in his lifetime. Rather than being thought of as a single method, his work would be best served if recognized and utilized as potentially separate components. Although the effectiveness of these individual components might be increased by using them in concert, there are many situations in which they can be applied in their own right.

Keywords: improvisational drama, psychodrama, role playing, role theory, sociodrama, sociometry

THE TERM PSYCHODRAMA has come to be used in two senses. The first meaning refers to the therapeutic role-playing method usually conducted in groups. This approach was developed by J. L. Moreno, MD (1889–1974) in the mid-1930s, and it is sometimes referred to as classical psychodrama. A more general meaning has come to refer to the entire complex of Moreno’s ideas and methods developed from 1908 onward, including:

1. A revisioned “religion of encounter” and a sense that the Divine can “speak” through the creative process in any individual, around 1908 (Moreno, 1989, p. 29–34).

2. The use of improvisation to enliven the dramatic play of children in the parks of Vienna, also around 1908 (Moreno, 1989).

3. The use of self-help, egalitarian group work (rather than having the group leader as authority) with prostitutes in Vienna, around 1912 (Moreno, 1989).

4. The idea of allowing people the freedom to express their preferences and having those preferences respected, so that people can affiliate with whom they
chose rather than be assigned arbitrarily to subgroups (i.e., the roots of sociometry, in the refugee camp of Mittendorf, near Vienna, around 1917; Moreno, 1989).

5. The creation of what was possibly the first improvisational drama troupe, “Das Stegreiftheater” (i.e., “Theater of Spontaneity,” in 1921–1923, in Vienna, and later, other experiments with impromptu theatre in New York City, around 1930–1931 (Moreno, 1989, p. 73).

6. The application of the aforementioned egalitarian spirit and recognition of the therapeutic benefit of group therapy at Sing Sing prison, which was presented to the American Psychiatric Association in 1931 (Moreno, 1989).

7. The development of sociometry in assigning and working with residents at the Hudson School for Girls around 1933–1936 (Marineau, 1989).

8. The extension of work with groups, impromptu theatre, and sociometry, leading to the development of classical psychodrama, around 1936–1937 (Marineau, 1989).

9. The development of theories about roles, social networks, interpersonal relations, and the like as written about in early journals produced by Moreno, around 1937 and beyond (with this in turn becoming one of the foundations of role theory in sociology and social psychology).

10. Promoting the integration of spontaneity and imagination into other creative arts therapies and the general exercise of the arts in culture, in contrast to an earlier over-emphasis on learning the “right” methods and structures, or following the compositions of the masters.

11. Development of ideas about spontaneity and creativity, which though noticeable in earlier writings, become more elaborated in his published journals.

In this article, I emphasize that Moreno’s work is more encompassing than psychodrama, which was just one application of his varied interests. Nor do his many contributions constitute an inseparable package. The reason for this over-focus on Moreno’s work as applied to psychotherapy is that Moreno, having trained as a physician, found he could make a living doing therapy, and this application became the most prominent aspect of Moreno’s work. Yet he always held a vision of a goal that was far broader. (In this, he was similar to Freud, who did not want psychoanalysis to be used only by physicians in treating mental illness—the challenge of helping people become more aware of their own unconscious forces applied to many other fields, from anthropology to literature.)

In the 1940s and early 1950s, Moreno wrote as actively about sociometry as he did about psychodrama. Even after giving his journal Sociometry to the American Sociological Association in 1956, he continued to make efforts to emphasize his interest in this broader vision.
During the 1950s and 1960s, psychotherapy was a growing element in psychiatric treatment, and the writing in Moreno’s journals focused more on these concerns. Also, because Moreno’s home base was his sanitarium at Beacon, in upstate New York, students came to learn about psychodrama as a type of therapy. Finally, those studying with Moreno were most impressed by the personal experiences they had as protagonists and the power of his method for helping to resolve the psychosocial issues in their own lives.

This focus on the psychotherapeutic applications of Moreno’s work was reemphasized in the decision in the later 1970s by the newly formed American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama, Group Psychotherapy, and Sociometry to make the attainment of a degree in one of the mental health professions a prerequisite for certification. Then, in the examination process for certification, students of psychodrama were also expected to be knowledgeable about sociometry and Moreno’s philosophy. Nevertheless, a general impression has emerged, I think, that psychodrama as therapy is the key, and that the complex of Morenean approaches constitutes an inseparable package. However, in this article, I challenge that assumption.

The Scope of Morenean Work

It is important to remember, then, that psychodrama as therapy was only one of Moreno’s valuable contributions. Different people might find any of his other general ideas equally compelling: (a) a philosophy and psychology of creativity and spontaneity; (b) a metaphysical or spiritual philosophy or theology emphasizing creativity and also immanence—that is, the power of divine energy as channeled through the creativity and consciousness of every sentient being; (c) role theory as a powerful, user-friendly language and theory of individual, family, and social psychology; (d) sociometry as a useful method for clarifying interpersonal and group dynamics; (e) improvisational theatre as a potentially useful vehicle for sociatry, an extension of psychiatry into the general community and culture, for mental hygiene and intergroup healing; (f) sociodrama as an activity that applies psychodramatic methods to address cultural issues; (g) psychodramatic methods and action techniques, using the various specific techniques alone or a few at a time in a wide range of other therapies, education, and other contexts; (h) applying group interactive methods to foster experiential learning for education, business, rehabilitation, recreation, community building, religion, political action, and so forth.

Each of these ideas has its own value, and can be applied creatively on its own. Using them in combination often is even more effective. However, although synergy is generally a useful principle, it is not required in every case. Indeed, this often implicit requirement may stifle the ultimate optimal spread of these very valuable individual components and subcomponents.
Problems With Terminology

The term *psychodrama* has connotations that are different from its formal definition. That is, the prefix *psycho* and the suffix *drama* are semantically loaded, evoking unintended subtle emotional associations.

First, the prefix *psycho* has been contaminated. Although it refers to the mind, psycho recalls the slang word for psychotic, as in the suspense-filled 1950s Alfred Hitchcock movie *Psycho*. Also, for much of the mid-20th century, the field of psychology was most popularly associated with mental illness. Another problem with the prefix *psycho* is its association with psychoanalysis, which in turn is associated with Freud, sex, hidden motives, and the vague threat of having one’s deepest secrets exposed. The cartoon theme of an odd patient on the couch in a bearded psychiatrist’s office has become ubiquitous. As the legendary Hollywood producer Sam Goldwyn (of MGM) once said, “Anyone who sees a psychiatrist should have his head examined!” The major and minor psychiatric disorders were conflated, and seeking help for any of them was socially stigmatized. To this day, many people still are prejudiced against anything with *psycho* in the name.

As for the suffix *drama*, this term has become associated with the cultural tradition of scripted and rehearsed theatre, something phony. Drama is also often associated with overacting, histrionics, overreacting, being self-indulgent, exhibitionistic (showing-off), and almost by definition, with being narcissistic and egocentric. It is the opposite of the virtues associated with being cool, understated, or the strong, silent type, or with being modest and simple. To dramatize is to self-indulgently exaggerate, and one who does this is labeled a “drama queen.”

The term *drama* also suggests a situation that has been artificially exaggerated, with its more emotional elements heightened. Also, a drama may suggest complex subplots and a hint of mystery or tricky obscurity. Unexpected plot twists are almost expected. For these reasons, the suffix *drama* often turns people off and makes them wary about becoming involved with anything related to drama.

The related idea of *play*, as in role-playing, gets confused with the idea of pretending, pretense, and, by extension, inauthenticity. Saying that someone is “just playing a role” can be a kind of accusation of deceptiveness (Blatner & Blatner, 1997, p. 113).

The prejudices against psychology and playfulness are changing gradually, to be sure. Society is moving into a time in which knowing practical psychology is becoming recognized as being as relevant and necessary as a knowledge of science. Even more than therapists, leaders in the world of business and organization are discovering this fact. On the whole, unfortunately, most people still seem to be fairly wary of anything involving psychology. As a
result, people who want to sell their skills regarding any parts of the wonderfully rich complex of Moreno’s ideas and methods often select less semantically loaded terms to describe what they do. Often they use alternative terms to describe the process, combining words such as *experiential*, *action*, *role*, *simulation*, or *sociodramatic* with other terms such as *methods*, *techniques*, or *approaches*, among others. Advertisers take into consideration such problems of naming when deciding how to market products, and psychodramatists who would market their services to businesses, organizations, schools and other contexts might do well to follow suit.

**Can Sociometry Be Applied Separately?**

It is possible to do psychodrama without sociometry or sociometry without psychodrama. Sociometry, like psychodrama, may be understood as a broader category including an awareness of group dynamics as well as the narrower category of a formal method for assessing interpersonal preferences. In this larger sense, it is good for a psychodrama director to “think sociometrically,” even if no specific sociometric techniques are applied in the group itself. However, I focus here on the point that one can systematically employ sociometric methods without doing classical psychodrama and vice versa.

Many professionals use mixtures of sociometry, with or without variations of role theory, to facilitate social dynamics in schools and businesses. This may be done with no recourse to any actual role-playing or enactment. For example, Diana Jones (2001) consults with businesses in New Zealand and uses sociometric techniques to clarify and improve interpersonal and organizational dynamics.

The problem with the word *sociometry* is that, like psychodrama, it also can be used in a more nonspecific, general fashion, or in reference to the methods themselves that assess group dynamics. This more restricted meaning also can refer to two types of methods: The more classical approach in sociometry assesses reports in groups of the group members’ preferences regarding some specific criterion. Other methods, sometimes called *near-sociometric techniques*, elicit feedback from the group about their feelings about various issues. Techniques such as the spectrogram, circle sociometry, and the locogram, among others, could all be classified as near-sociometric methods. Although these techniques are generally associated with sociometry, it would be better to recognize them as simply action techniques that facilitate group dynamics. All types of sociometry may or may not be combined with role-playing, sociodrama, or psychodrama, but this synergy is not required in all cases.

Moreno considered sociometry to be one of his primary contributions to what he envisioned as a yet-to-be-developed field of applied sociology. He considered his book *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group*
Psychotherapy, and Sociodrama to be his magnum opus, his most significant work. Psychodrama was hardly mentioned in the first edition, though it was more prominently included in his 1953 second edition. Moreno tried to reassert his broader vision, which went beyond the formal sociometric method, and included the more general goal of promoting spontaneity in social networks, not just in individuals. In that broader vision, Moreno hoped for a society in which everyone would have greater freedom of expression and input, and people would be helped to be more open to feedback and to integrate it in constructive ways.

Role Theory

Like sociometry, role theory can be applied in innumerable settings without the requirement that any role-playing or enactment be used. People are wary of performing, and of the increased and uncontrollable self-disclosure that comes with enactment. They tend to feel more vulnerable, and they and the group may need a great deal of warming up before feeling comfortable. In some groups with multiple agenda, it is questionable whether the group trust can be raised to the degree needed for actual enactment.

One modification that addressed this wariness about performance was offered by the fields of drama therapy: Have people play roles that are more distanced, in which the person is not playing him- or herself, but rather some fictional character. One may feel less revealed that way, and many people with less psychological mindedness, less maturity, or a great deal of defensive structure require such protections. One major leader in drama therapy, Renee Emunah (1994), views psychodrama as a kind of culmination of the drama therapy process, but notes that people require more or less time in getting ready for that phase of the process.

I envision role theory as a relatively natural language for teaching basic principles of psychology, so the general public can participate more readily in mastering the concepts, and also more as equals in exploring the situations. The reduction of the mystification of the expert fits with many contemporary theories of adult education (Knowles, 1984).

Psychodramatic Techniques

I envision psychodramatists appealing to various local departments of psychology, counseling, clinical social work, pastoral counseling, teacher training, and so forth, and offering a wealth of techniques and concepts that can be integrated with the other approaches to therapy being taught. Psychodrama need not be presented as a separate approach, to be compared as a whole with Jungian, Adlerian, Rogerian, and other schools of thought. Of course it can be
so presented, but I think psychodramatists will be more effective if they can influence people to adapt and include these ideas and methods in whatever way they are willing and able to do so.

It may be enough to begin with teaching one session or occasional sessions within a whole course or to teach one course as part of a curriculum. A separate class might be given to sociometry, for example, because it is rich enough to be used in other contexts. Creative adaptation of the teaching material will be necessary.

Psychotherapy and counseling are becoming increasingly eclectic, and this opens even more possibilities for practitioners utilizing the many benefits of Morenean methods. Role reversal, simple action sociograms (family or social network sculptures), empty chair technique, and others may be used during the session, and such techniques require neither the presence of a group nor auxiliary egos. Many of these techniques are used already by therapists who claim to be adherents to other approaches, such as family therapy or Gestalt therapy, often without acknowledging their source. Describing the many possible applications of psychodramatic methods in therapy would quickly go beyond the scope of this article.

I have emphasized psychodramatic methods in the titles of some of my books and chapters precisely because I felt that the methods themselves may have far wider acceptance, utilization, and impact than would the whole classical method. I also have likened classical psychodrama to major surgery, but there is another far broader category in medicine known as minor surgery. Minor surgery is done not by surgeons, but by general physicians, physicians’ assistants, and nurses and includes such procedures as sewing up lacerations, taking small skin biopsies, or draining abscesses. Minor surgery uses some of the same principles of major surgery, such as tying off blood vessels, suturing, sterilizing, and anesthetizing, but in a more modest fashion. Also, there are many more occasions for minor surgery in an office than major surgery, which requires a team of nurses and others, a special operating room, and more. Similarly, I envision a far more widespread use of psychodramatic methods integrated with other kinds of therapy compared to classical psychodrama. This is not a matter of ideal or theoretical value, but of practical realities.

**Moreno’s Concepts**

Many of Moreno’s other basic principles can be similarly usefully integrated into other therapies (Blatner, 2005). His ideas about the valuing of creativity, the cultivation of spontaneity, and the connections between these qualities and their spiritual source can also be framed as an extension of the metarole of the *choosing self* and its relationship to its own guidance and leadership (Blatner, 2007). The goal is to help clients shift their identity
away from the roles they play and more toward the metarole that acts more like a psychodrama director, an inner self-manager. With this metarole, one can reflect on, explore, and decide which roles will be played when and how they will be performed. Indeed, the implicit development of the skills of the metarole might be the main common denominator among many if not most of the different approaches to psychotherapy. With the help of role theory and through a slight modification in the way role-playing or psychodrama therapy is conducted, this shift can be made quite explicit. As a result, the client becomes a more active collaborator in the healing process.

Beyond therapy, focus on the development of metarole identity and skillfulness can also be used in personal development—helping the normal or healthy to become even healthier—in coaching, spiritual direction, or leadership training.

**Applying Drama Beyond the Clinical Context**

Fifteen years before developing psychodrama as a type of therapy, Moreno developed a type of socially activist improvisational drama in Vienna, his “Theater of Spontaneity.” His goals included a revitalization of theatre itself as well as making the process of participating in theatre as either actor or audience member more interactive, involving, and authentic. Other innovators in the theatre arts, such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Anton Artaud, or Jerzy Grotowsky have had similar inspirations, though they well may never have heard of Moreno. As a result, there has been an increasing convergence as theatre artists have been applying drama in the fields of education, community building, personal development, business, religion, and other nonclinical areas.

In a larger sense, this serves Moreno’s ideal of *sociatry*—taking the principles of psychiatry or clinical psychology beyond the context of treating those identified (by self or society) as sick, and addressing the cultural contexts that need healing and development (Moreno, 1946). In the past 15 years, the convergence of different types of what has come to be called *applied theatre* marks an increasing cross-fertilization among professionals who are using drama in these nonclinical settings.

A notable example of this is the way Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas’ method of *Playback Theatre* has been significantly expanding. This approach, though influenced by psychodrama, is really a creative synthesis of other nonscripted theatre approaches. Another growing subfield has been the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil in the 1960s. These and other approaches are described more fully in a recently published anthology about applied theatre (Blatner, 2007).

As these forms evolve, there is room for cross-fertilization with other, more directly Morenian methods. Sociodrama and role-playing in education were
promoted by Moreno and his followers in the 1940s, and have continued to be used and incorporated into related approaches. I encourage practitioners to recognize these extraclinical related fields, join with them, and cross-fertilize with them. The goal is not just to get recognition for Moreno and psychodrama, but to suggest that his complex of tools and ideas is so deep and rich that people should return and find still other resources, possible applications, and new adaptations and variations.

**Related Arts Fields**

Psychodrama has held itself a bit apart from other creative arts therapies, and that is understandable, considering its historic roots as primarily a type of therapy that uses drama, rather than being an art form that subsequently is found to have therapeutic applications. However, Moreno not only promoted the integration of improvisation into the creative arts therapies, but also encouraged pioneers in this endeavor to publish in his early journals. This angle again extends beyond the clinical context, as there are efforts in personal growth and development programs and continuing education programs to add more improvisation to the learning and exercise of the arts.

**Group Work**

Moreno supported group work of all kinds—especially emphasizing those approaches that put less emphasis on the teacher or analyst as the focus and that fostered interactivity. These groups did not need to be psychodramatic to gain his support. He was the impetus and primary founder of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, which has recently expanded its mission to include more than clinical types of group leadership. Group work in many fields is becoming recognized, in part in recognition of the need for teamwork for optimal creativity.

Mid-career, Moreno (1956) wrote about the third psychiatric revolution, which for him was the emergence of group approaches in therapy. (His view of the history of psychiatry was based on mid-20th century knowledge.) The first revolution was the humane treatment of the mentally ill, beginning around 1790; the second revolution was the introduction of psychodynamic psychology and psychotherapy, beginning with Freud. Group therapy was becoming popular following the Second World War, and Moreno was thrilled with its potential. He did not anticipate what would actually become the third psychiatric revolution—the introduction of psychotropic medicines and the decline of the large numbers of chronically hospitalized patients. (His vision still may be somewhat valid as a fourth psychiatric revolution, as group approaches become more integrated in the preventive formats of education, self-help programs, personal development workshops, and the like.)
In the late 1960s, a hint of Moreno’s vision was reignited with the growth of community mental health, but that, too, has just struggled along, under-funded, in a late 20th century political turn toward the ideals of self-reliance and the neglect of the disadvantaged. I think Moreno may have been not just 50 but perhaps 100 years before his time in this vision, but I think he was on to something: The power of self-help groups, learning groups, and healing groups of all sorts is increasingly being recognized, and the general theme of empowerment is becoming more widespread.

The Need for a Revisioning of the Field

Psychodrama as a method of psychotherapy is becoming increasingly marginalized because of a number of factors, including (a) the relative lack of published papers with hard evidence of efficacy; (b) the relative paucity of academically associated teachers who especially value the method (compared to the numbers who identify more with other approaches); (c) a continuing proliferation of other methods, many of which integrate certain elements that were first developed in psychodrama, though often with no acknowledgment of this Morenean source; (d) the difficulty in finding clients and contexts that can support the more extended (more than an hour) group sessions—which includes the difficulty in lining up groups in general, and the economic pressures that cut into the income of the director if a codirector or several trained auxiliaries are included; and (e) people who have had negative experiences with role-playing or psychodrama, perhaps from leaders who were overly confrontational, too focused on evoking emotion, or who did not generate sufficient warm-up (Blatner, 2000).

Perhaps one way to counter this marginalization is to reframe the mission. Rather than focusing the primary identity on being purveyors of classical psychodrama, psychodramatists could instead promote themselves as being able to introduce a generous variety of approaches that may be useful in a wide range of contexts. I have likened Moreno’s methods to carpenter’s electric tools: They can be useful whether one is building a chair, a house, or a finely crafted jewel case.

Classical psychodrama still offers great value, and should be retained as a more intensive type of treatment, often effective when mere talk therapies cannot reach the deeper complexes of bodily feelings and images that are more associated with the right hemisphere of the brain and limbic systems. Yet Moreno’s insights should be recognized as transcending this application and as extending into many arenas.

More recently, for example, the International Association of Group Psychotherapy (IAGP) expanded its own name, becoming the International Association of Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes, and recognized that this
added dimension includes not only therapy, but also aspects of education, organizational development, and even social change. Moreno is honored as the founder of this IAGP organization (in 1973) because of his persistent efforts at promoting preliminary conferences in Europe and South America in the 20 years before his death. The recognition of the applications of group approaches beyond the clinical context is in line with the expanded frontier and identity of psychodrama I propose in this article.

Summary

Moreno developed many ideas about the values of spontaneity and methods for promoting this source of creativity, not only in individuals or in one-to-one therapy, but also in families, groups, larger organizations and institutions, and even in cultural activities and international relations. His work included forms of improvisational drama that have influenced the formation of a variety of increasingly popular offshoots or parallel developments (e.g., Theatre of the Oppressed, Theatre in Education, competitive improvisation as a recreational sport, Playback Theatre, bibliodrama), as well as innovative approaches to business consultation (e.g., applied sociometry; Blatner, 2007). Among other uses, components of his psychodramatic methods are used by lawyers in preparing for trials and by teachers of medical students, to promote empathy.

Psychodramatists would do well to recognize as their mission not just the promotion of psychodrama, but also the dissemination of concepts and methods developed by Moreno. This broadening of identity would help Moreno’s contributions be appreciated and utilized in other approaches to therapy as well as in other nontherapy fields, such as education or organizational development. This broader vision also would allow for a more open adaptation of influences from other fields, including insights and developments by innovators other than Moreno so that the processes of cross-fertilization and ongoing creative development can continue.

REFERENCES


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