

Guidelines for Practice in Sociodrama

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Summary: This chapter is about the key factors and some core principles for best practice in the different phases of a sociodrama session. We will also discuss the importance of evaluation of needs and results, internal marketing and strategic planning, even before we start any intervention with sociodrama, whether it is in education, organizations, health or community.

Key Words: Sociodrama, Inner Source, Surplus Reality, First Universe, Strategic Planning, Social Entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

The following reflections are derived from my 30 years of experience as a practitioner, informed by what the method discusses nowadays, and by Moreno's structural ideas on psychodrama, sociodrama, sociometry, and sociatry. It is important to clarify that these are complex and eternally evolving concepts that are discussed at the International Sociodrama Conference, now having its 7th meeting in 2021, which started with the support of the Portuguese Psychodrama Society (SPP) fourteen years ago (2007).

As the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, used to say "There is nothing more practical than a good theory." After twenty years of training sociodrama directors at SPP (which began in 2000) and also with this fertile soil of the European Sociodrama Performers Project, I realize more and more that there are many different approaches to sociodrama and that this diversity should be respected. However, it seems relevant to integrate some reflections from my own sociodrama practice, teaching and supervision.

I find it fundamental to reflect on the guidelines and core principles of any action method, as there are many shortcomings in mindless action and not only at the other extreme: the so called "analysis paralysis". Professionals using action methods are very often attracted to the impulsive action, neglecting the reflection, the philosophy, the theory.

In this chapter, I will mainly interweave concepts from Moreno and concepts from a contemporary author of social theory, Otto Scharmer (U Theory). As a source, I will also integrate concepts from some social psychologists (Kurt Lewin, Festinger, Tajfel).

What is an accepted definition of Sociodrama?

"It helps to clarify the topics and problems of the group, not focusing on the individual psychological problems. The group is the protagonist: the true subject of Sociodrama is the group and its exploration" (JL Moreno: in Minkin, 2013)

Sociodrama may be applied to the contexts of education, clinical (family or couple therapy), health (chronic diseases or prevention), organizations or community work.

Any sociodrama session has three phases: warm-up, drama/action and sharing. I will aim to cover the core principles in each phase.

1. Warm-Up – Presence, Flow and Spontaneity

The warm-up has the goal of icebreaking, increasing the spontaneity and the cohesion of the group, before focusing on the common problems or the collective emergent.

Understanding how spontaneity and creativity are of the utmost importance in the co-creation of reflection for collective problems, the director should try to model this same attitude of being present, spontaneous, creative and connected to the here and now, what Moreno described as the “autonomous healing centre” and, more recently, Otto Scharmer calls the “Inner Source”, listening and sensing, which relates to intuition, flow, trusting and following the process of the group.

It is important to have some kind of strategic plan but it is also important to start with creating a space for presence, with some silence, with some connection within, with this inner source. According to Sharmer, this defines and establishes the *quality of the soil* as if we were doing organic farming. Otherwise it may result in very impulsive and superficial enactments. This author says “The quality of an intervention depends on the inner source of the leader”. And I would add the ability to develop the inner source or the “autonomous healing centre” of the participants and foster the cohesion of the group.

“The greatest difficulty of our actual mastery of the social universe is not primarily in the lack of invention of instruments but in Man itself. He is inept and inert. His spontaneity is inadequate for the task.” in *The Future of Man`s World* by JL Moreno (1947)

Mindfulness practices, active or more passive, that encourage presence and alignment with what Moreno calls the First Universe, or cosmic dimension, help us move from an egocentric point of view to a more ecocentric point of view (Otto Sharmer). The symbol of Psychodrama and Sociodrama depicts the encounter with oneself and with the other but also the ascension from the Second Universe to the First Universe - the Unified Field, a more cosmic realm.



The expansion of the self from the plane of the individual to the cosmic plane will be a realization process of, by and through the self, a movement from the lower plane of existence to the superior plan, the time for each movement equaling that of a historical epoch. (JL Moreno, The Future of Mankind).

A sociodrama session should start slowly, as Sue Daniels says in her workshops that “Slower is Faster” which is also present in the famous sentence from Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger, my teacher: “take your time”.



I usually recommend some meditation in silence or some meditative walking and progressively encountering the other, establishing eye contact and other forms of non-verbal contact, the first form of interaction/encounter in our ontogenetic development.

In a sociodrama session, it is a good practice to respect the human developmental and natural sequence. Drama re-enacts life and the possibility of active learning through experience, implying that our practice should be informed by the developmental stages of the individual and the group, as in life itself.

To promote safety and progressive cohesion, it is important to start the sociodramatic intervention with pair exercises, preferably related to the topic of the session, in order to also increase the cognitive and emotional warming up and to cultivate a feeling of “safe space”.

As Jerka Moreno used to teach “The pair is the first group”. It is in a dyad that we started our social interaction in life.

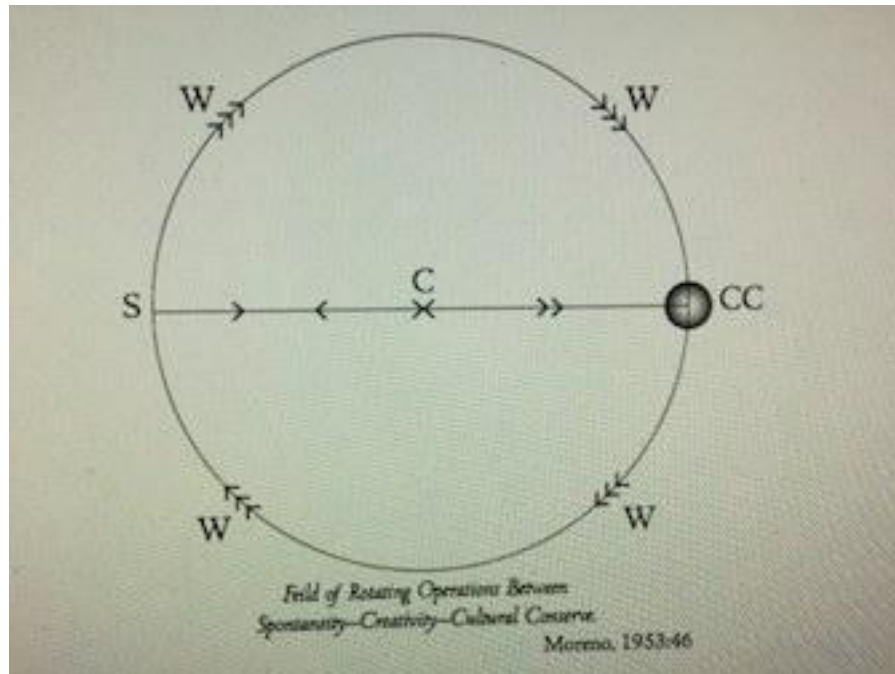
We can evolve from dyads to small groups of 4 or 6 people, with some *superordinated goals* (Tajfel), preferably using some physical enactment, to start the physical warm-up and to prepare for the action mode.

It is also a good practice, from my experience, to start with silly criteria for subgroup forming, instead of the formal and usual criteria of social identification for that particular culture, not to reinforce the stereotypes that very often create separation and conflict.

This form of encounter, related to unusual criteria of social identification (such as the colour of clothes or dates of birth), raises an attitude of curiosity and diminishes judgement or stereotyped thinking, very often present when there are conflicts or rigid social roles.

It is important to look at another person, even if we think we know them very well, as if it is our first encounter ...

This allows us to get out of the *Cultural Conserve* of that group, increasing our spontaneity and enabling us to *co-create* new solutions at both *co-unconscious* and *co-conscious* levels, following the sacred formula of the *canon of creativity* (J.L. Moreno).



For warm-up games, I also like to have the group participants playing their heroes (Best Selves), so they can have an easier access to their values and higher consciousness and get warmed up to enter a collective “*hero’s journey*” (Joseph Campbell). Using again Moreno concepts, we would say that we are giving voice and access to the individual’s *godhead* or, as we say in the Hassidic tradition of the cabala, to the divine sparkle.

2. Sociometry as a Sociatry tool

Moreno wrote: *A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind. But no adequate therapy can be prescribed as long as mankind is not an unity in some fashion and as long as its organization remains unknown.* (JL Moreno, *Who Shall Survive?*)

Moreno’s ultimate vision was that humanity could be healed (sociatry) and, for that purpose, tools such as sociometry and role reversal were, for him, considered essential. The idea of working through what he named as a “social microscope” is essential to that view – meaning that, working with smaller groups, one can reflect and impact on a larger scale.

Sociometry is also a very effective warm-up and action research tool to know the truth of a group’s underlying dynamic and organization, in terms of informal power networks, subgroups, exclusion and sociodynamic effect. It allows the system to see itself and is an action research which is truly democratic in the making and sharing of results. However, there is a need to master the art of sociometry, in order to know and to help a group, not forgetting how useful the developmental sequence is.

Sociometry is revolutionary; it is a microscope on those categories, a social microscope that can make visible within dyads and small groups the invisible forces affecting all humanity. It reveals the sociodynamic effect, the consolidation of choices to a small number of people at the expense of the whole, and the organic unity underlying humanity and the human experience. (JL Moreno)

As with any tool, sociometry can be used in a constructive or in a destructive way, so there is a need for some training in order to master the method and in order to diminish the sociodynamic effect, which relates to exclusion and social injustice, and the human tendency where only a few have all the power and the resources.

It seems important to understand and share the new perspective that the excluded ones are gatekeepers that allow the awareness of the group to open to other realms of reality.

The Axiogram which may evolve to an Axiodrama, measures the distribution of the group in any scale or dimension, can also be used as a way to a very quick and deep understanding of the diversity of opinions, beliefs or values and to promote a rich dialogue and integration within different visions of the same reality. It is also an excellent warm-up for any common topic to reflect upon.

2. Re-enactment – Diagnosis, Co-Conscious, Co-Unconscious and Catharsis

Very often in sociodrama, it is advisable to start with a re-enactment of the traumatic situation, as a way of understanding the present problems and the different views of the problem and also as an emotional catharsis (abreaction) which can also be a healing factor.

However is also important to allow the system to see itself, following the double and mirror principles (catharsis of integration).

We can use different methods for the drama phase: sculptures with real people or objects, Incognito Auxiliaries (Manuela Maciel and Mark Wentworth), the Rosalie Minkin Method, Empty Chair, Interweaving (*retramatisação* from Arnaldo Lieberman), the wheel of memories from James Sacks, the Living Newspaper from JL Moreno, and many other sociodrama and expressive arts methodologies.

The re-enactment of the trauma by itself can be retraumatizing if there is no way out or if the group stays stuck in the trauma. We do need role-playing, role-reversal, role creating and mainly, surplus reality, to be able to bring transformation to any collective trauma.

As an example, I recall when, directing a sociodrama in 2015 at the Kos (Greek Island) Sociodrama International Conference, with a group of Greek volunteers who had been helping refugees from North Africa to enter Europe. We used Rosalie Minkin's method of re-enactment with role-playing and zooming, that depicted the tragic situation of the refugees, being exploited by the boat gangsters and dying in the sea, and also of the volunteers fear, burnout and exhaustion with this tragedy and with the lack of official support, both from the official organizations and from other European organizations. In order to avoid a retraumatizing experience, but instead a healing and transforming one, we had to find a surplus reality situation. One in which a more positive common vision was co-created and enacted, calling for access to an inner source of experiencing better self and collective vision that could develop and empower the hope and the solutions for the future, where mistakes were reversible and new ideas were rehearsed in a protected setting.

4. Surplus Reality – Experiencing the Best Future

The encounter between old Freud and young Moreno in Vienna is well known, where Moreno said something like: "I start where you finish. You analyze people's dreams: I

help them to make their dreams come true". As Otto Scharmer says, *Sensing and Presencing the highest Future Individual and Collective Potential is Healing*, since the psyche does not distinguish reality from imagination, when we are actively engaged. That is, for me, where the main healing power of sociodrama resides.

Playing in our generative Universe, we can have magic healing moments of change, where hope is rooted and the people are empowered, overcoming the usual obstacles to change, such as the Voice of Judgement (Mind), the Voice of Cynicism (Heart) and the Voice of Fear (Will). It is important to gradually evolve into an open mind, heart and will, developing our curiosity, compassion and courage (Otto Scharmer), in the fertile soil of play, flow and passion.

Surplus reality is a way of extending and focusing the capacity for imagination and play. The development of the imagination transforms consciousness and contributes to the growth of hopefulness, originality, and the ability to entertain new ideas and enter into different realities than our own (Hosking, 1989). The psychodrama stage is viewed 'as-if it is an imaginary arena in which anything, including the impossible, can happen' (Kellermann, 1992). Entering into the world of make-believe brings forth the quality that Moreno (1972a) called dramatic spontaneity, that which gives newness and vitality to feelings, actions and words, and assists in energizing and unifying the self. Moreno believed that humans are cosmic beings as well as social beings. In surplus reality the mythic dimension of life can be portrayed. "God is always within and among us, as he is for children. Instead of coming down from the skies, he comes in by way of the stage door. God is not dead, he is alive, in psychodrama!" (Moreno & Moreno, 1975: 22). Play is an essential human quality and the ability to play is fundamental to healing.

Winnicott (1971) argues that in play the child or adult is free to be creative and use the whole personality, and that, through creativity, the individual discovers the self. The emphasis on play, imagination, intuition and creativity in surplus reality gives sociodrama its magical quality.

5. Sharing and Action Plan

Here it is important to have space for cognitive reflection as well as the emotional *loveback*. Sharing comes from the heart and not only from the mind, or rather from the integration of both. Sharing from role usually comes first, followed by personal sharing. As much as in the whole process, the sociodrama director and assistants need to contain and protect the private roles during the sharing, in order to protect the sociodramatic contract and context.

As I learned with Diane Adderley in the Performers Project, we can also use objects for the sharing, to concretize not only what we learned in the sociodrama but also to develop some action plan that empowers and commits the participants in moving towards a shared vision and a common goal, as the first step that could be taken.

6. Strategic Plan, Entrepreneurship and Systemic Thinking

In 1993, I was working as a consultant in CIFAG in the area of entrepreneurship, to help entrepreneurs create their new businesses and I led a training at Durham University (UK) on their Entrepreneurship for Teachers Program.

It was in that period that I started to realize that teaching and social intervention can be developed with as much effectiveness and professionalism as with any other business.



Sociodrama can be applied to education, organizational or community development purposes. For any of those social Interventions to be effective, it is important to have not only the skills of what happens in front of the group (in terms of leadership skills, presence and sociodrama tools) but also to have some kind of strategic planning in advance.

I like the analogy between sociodrama, arts and music. Let's say, before the improvisation, you need preparation and in between the sounds there are the silences that make the actual melody.

Strategic planning, in a nutshell, is related to answering those five classical questions of any intervention: What for?, Who?, When?, Where? and How?. So, as every organizational consultant knows, it is important to dialogue with the actors in the social system who hold more formal power, so we can understand their request, offer support, be aware of their resistance to change and their willingness to accept our expertise. We must also communicate through the internal marketing system, engaging the different significant actors who need to be involved throughout the organizational system.

Sometimes we need a more proactive attitude to explain the sociodrama method and its benefits, using a simple and universal language that takes away any distortions, sometimes wrongly associated with the name psychodrama or sociodrama.

So, in order to have a strategic plan, we need to understand the goal, the purpose (*what for*) of the intervention in terms of expected results. We need to discuss and advise about

who should be involved and the ideal size of the groups. We need to check and prepare the setting, the physical space where the session will occur, checking the lights, the air, the temperature, the breaks, the toilets ...The audiovisuals and other materials that we might need. And also the when, that is the schedule, the dates, the timing. We should also plan the evaluation before and after the intervention and a follow-up to assess the long-term effects, the dropouts, etc.

If we consider that sociodrama is a service, it is also important to consider the four Ps from the classical Marketing and Quality of Service Theory (Kotler) on how to measure the quality of this service: Promotion, Place, Product (Service) and, last but not the least, Price.

To become even more professional, social entrepreneurship can be a profitable activity, as with any other service, not to discourage volunteer work but also not to embark on stereotypes considering the profit-making or the relationship with money or abundance of the provider.

7. Training and Preparation of the Sociodrama Director

We find that, even before the long training and supervision and intervision of sociodrama in its different applications and related theoretical fields (Communication, Social Psychology, Group Dynamics, Leadership), there is a need to work on the self awareness and the inner source of the sociodramatist herself. We are the main instruments of our work.

Revolution and evolution start with each one of us and spread invisibly, like a bacterium or a virus during an epidemic. The relationships we create with others throughout our lives in small groups are responsible; they may be both pathological and beyond our awareness (Zerka Moreno in To Dream Again).

The sociodrama director needs to work on her/his emotional and social skills and on her ability to be present, listening and sensing the group and very often co-leading with another colleague. Being able to be like an empty vessel, a facilitator for the group, without judgement, prejudice or stereotypes, integrating and valuing diversity, knowing how to manage conflicts and also how to assert, use voice and other non-verbal elements.

It is controversial whether the personal preparation should engage a period of psychotherapy or personal development, but it is advisable that the psychodrama or sociodrama methods should be experienced by the future director.

Even though it is not mandatory, in Portugal, ideally the sociodramatist works in a team with a co-leader, supporting each other and co-creating together, therefore modeling the synergy that they are intending to develop and to sustain in the group itself.

More than ever, as the Erasmus Performers Sociodrama Project has shown us, effective leadership depends more on the co-operation capacity and the ability to inspire the group learning process instead of competition or exhibition of competences.

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