

Psychology on a Page 11: Psychodrama - the basis of action techniques

"The word is not the route to the psyche. In the beginning was not the word, but the act." Jacob Moreno is the founder of Psychodrama, the use of theatrical performance and staging to re-enact events and circumstances from life. Trained as a doctor in Vienna 1912-1917, he rejected Freudian theory while still at medical school. In his autobiography, he writes that he told Freud after a lecture that he gave: *"I start where you leave off. You meet people in the artificial setting of your office. I meet them on the street and in their home, in their natural surroundings. You analyse their dreams. I give them the courage to dream again. You analyse them and tear them apart. I let them act out their conflicting roles and help them to put the parts back together again."*

Starting in 1921 he began experimenting with drama as a way of treating psychiatric patients in groups. He founded The Spontaneity Theatre which used improvisational drama as a means of treatment.

In the 1920's he also developed a set of ideas which he termed *Sociometry* – a research method for looking at the social structure of groups which involved *Sociograms* illustrating these structures. Moreno moved to the USA in 1925 and held a position at Columbia University. These ideas are very useful in group work.

Key ideas

- Humans are not just biologically determined (as Freud thought) but have a spiritual side and are influenced by their social context. *"He did not believe in Freud's model ... Freud came from biology, Moreno was inspired by the great religions of this world. Freud was atheistic. Moreno was not."*
- He emphasises the importance of **creativity** and **spontaneity** in human life. Children have a lot of these things but they get squashed. Life produces constraints, society demands conformity and therefore people get mired in habitual ways of responding where their spontaneity is stifled. He believed that therapeutic intervention should have the aim of enabling people to reconnect with their creativity and thus allow them to:
 - be more integrated as people
 - be able to respond more flexibly and creatively to new situations, and in the way they lead their lives
- Psychodrama as an intervention is designed to bring these aims about. He developed a range of techniques within Psychodrama such as role reversal and empty chair (before Fritz Perls).

In Zerka Moreno's words (in an interview with Victor Yalom Ph.D. on psychotherapy.net)

“The easiest way to think about [Psychodrama] is ‘the mind in action’. Instead of talking about your concerns we say ‘Don’t tell me. Show me! Showing means to act it out ... it helps you to express yourself in a new way .. a way that life doesn’t usually permit [in order to] make you more integrated.”

“We’re all broken and need to become more cohesive, more integrated from within. Through the catharsis of integration, we become balanced, within and without.”

By far the best thing if you want to experience this style of work is to do one of our Action Techniques Days. These happen twice a year, are free and if you put your name down for the Download, I'll add your email to the invitation list next time we send out invites. Then its first come, first served and we take the first 30 people.