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PSYCHODRAMATIC TREATMENT TECHNIQUES  
WITH PRISONERS IN A STATE OF ROLE TRANSITION<sup>1</sup>

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One of the inevitable results of incarceration is the difficulty faced by the offender at the time of his release in his re-entry to a free society. He must adjust to a system which in today's rapidly changing, technological world, has often changed drastically since the time of his entry. The prisoner has had an extended period of time in the prison community in which to warm up to the role of inmate, with its concomitant behavior. (Johnson, Savitz & Wolfgang, pp. 383-496).

Most inmates, prior to their incarceration, are members of delinquent groups with sub-cultures deviating materially from that of the dominant culture in our society. Other inmates, while in prison, are subjected to a continuous acculturation... The roles played by the inmate of a prison and the roles he is required to play upon his release are vastly different in most important aspects. The inmate is living apart from his wife, his parents, or any other relatives with whom he normally resides. What often passes unnoticed is that he is also away from the community roles and normal occupational roles.

(Haskell, March, 1960, pp. 22-23)

Upon release, the prisoner is expected to divest himself of the role adaptations which have taken place while he was incarcerated and warm up almost instantaneously to a new set of role expectations, often ones which were never properly mastered before.

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"It is the consensus of noted penologists, criminologists, sociologists, and others...that there is a definite need for preparation of inmates of correctional institutions for release into free society. The attempt to accomplish this end within the confines of a penal institution has apparently, up to now, met with no great success." (Tinsley & Grant, p. 111).

Within the last fifty years a variety of programs have been begun which attempt to modify the concept of total incarceration. Among these are work release programs, conjugal visits, and the week-end furlough, or home visit. (Johnson, Savitz & Wolfgang, pp. 693-698; Wicks, pp. 116, 119-122).

. . . along with attempts in the protected and structured environment to inculcate new patterns of social norms, he (the convict) needs the opportunity for practicing adequate social performance in the "real" outside world. Ultimately the resocialization of the offender will be hampered unless adequate opportunities for appropriate social performance and autonomy of action are provided before he is finally released to the free community through discharge or parole. (Johnson, Savitz & Wolfgang, p. 693).

Accordingly, it would appear beneficial to explore how psychodramatic methods may be utilized to enhance the prisoner's possibilities of success in these programs, and how he can be prepared to take on new roles adequately before he fully leaves the prison community.

Psychodrama was created by J. L. Moreno, M.D., a Viennese psychiatrist, who is recognized as a pioneer in the field of group psychotherapy. It is an improvised dramatic enactment of concerns in a person's life which he (she) would like to explore. Most commonly used as a form of group therapy, it enables the patient, under the direction of a therapist,<sup>2</sup> either to recreate

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<sup>2</sup> Like all forms of psychotherapy, psychodrama is best done under the direction of someone who has had extensive training in the particular method of therapy. Currently the center for training in psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy is the Moreno Institute, Beacon, New York.

a past experience or to place himself in a hypothetical one. Members of the group are called upon to play roles necessary for the production. Through acting out critical scenes, utilizing psychodramatic techniques, the patient is often able to gain insight into his interpersonal difficulties and methods of coping with stress.

A psychodrama begins with warming up, or getting ready for action. The aim is to bring the group psychologically together, help them focus their attention on the here and now, and to select one member, the protagonist, who presents his particular problem to the group (Sacks, 1967). In the action portion, the protagonist works toward exploring and eventually resolving his difficulties with the aid of the director and the group. During this phase it is important that role playing be within a specific context of time and place. For example, if a convict were presenting the scene of his leaving prison, it would be important to set up (using whatever props are available) the specific place he would leave from, and identify the exact day and time it would happen. This assists the protagonist and the group to warm up to the scene, making it more realistic.

A critical psychodramatic technique is role reversal, in which the protagonist momentarily assumes the role of another person who he has introduced into the psychodrama. In this way he is able to experience the situation from another's viewpoint, and to see himself from someone else's perspective.

Throughout psychodrama sessions the group can be of great assistance. They may suggest problems which the protagonist has not thought of or resists mentioning, like resuming heterosexual relationships with his/her spouse after some homosexual affairs in prison. They may counter an overly idealistic presentation with a more reality based critique. If the director has doubts about the authenticity of the person's presentation he might turn to the group with a comment like "What do you think, is this the way Bill is likely to handle it?" The group too is helped, because in each enactment they will see a part of themselves being presented. Often members can be involved in role training by being a stand-in for the protagonist and trying out alternative behavior. Here they are gaining practice for when their time will come to meet similar situations. Often by playing roles in another person's drama, each acquires insight into himself and people in his own life.

In the final portion of psychodrama, each member is asked to share some part of his life with the protagonist, such as how the

session has affected him, or what it reminds him of in his own life. In classical psychodrama, analyzing, advice-giving or criticisms are prohibited here, and the director is responsible for maintaining this. After the sharing, the director may want to add some therapeutic comments of an interpretive or supportive nature.

Psychodrama seems particularly suited for work with prison inmates. After release, prisoners often complain that "they give you a lot of talk about rehabilitation." Psychodrama is an action therapy which tends to rely less on the spoken word than many therapies, and does indeed give the convict a chance to do, and then to re-do, those parts of life that cause him difficulty. Many convicts have limited education and less than adequate skills in verbally communicating their feelings. With action therapy, a vehicle is available for safely demonstrating one's feelings, without words at all, if that is what is necessary. The purpose here is not to denigrate the use of language in psychotherapy, but merely to add that alternatives are available for use with those people for whom language does not come as readily. Because it is a form of group therapy, even those members whose problems are not being directly considered can benefit. Often more hesitant members can be gradually involved by playing roles in someone else's session.

Moreno has described in detail his use of psychodramatic and sociodramatic<sup>3</sup> techniques in the problem of cottage assignment in a correctional institution. Working with delinquent girls remanded to a correctional facility, Moreno addressed the problem of how to best assign new arrivals to a cottage in order to maximize satisfaction for all concerned. Among the methods he devised is the psychodramatic "Entrance Test", used to assess performance in a wide variety of roles. Each newcomer is given a test "in action" which requires performance in the role of family member, worker and community member. House-mothers and cottage members play auxiliary roles, and a jury is selected to rate the adequacy of the new arrival's performance. This information, combined with a number of other tests, is used in making assignments. Moreno carefully recorded and studied his work and concluded:

The runaway status of a community like Hudson is

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<sup>3</sup> Sociometry is the scientific exploration of the structure of a group, invented by J. L. Moreno and described at length in Who Should Survive?

an indication of the extent to which the community has become the psychological home for the members of its population. . . . After a four month period the effect of assignment became evident within the community. The number of runaways gradually dropped and during the following eight months. . . was unprecedentedly low, a total of six, which would be equally unusual for an open population outside the institution, consisting of an equal number of adolescents. (Moreno, 1953)

Moreno (1953) used the "Psychodramatic Exit Test" to evaluate students readiness to leave the institution and to assist them in the transition. The girls were asked to again perform psychodramatically in the roles they expected to face in the community. Through role training, the students could practice and prepare for their separation from the school.

Lassner (1950) has offered ten clinical vignettes describing his use of psychodrama with prison inmates. In his descriptions the author shows the wide variety of personal situations which the participants presented, and offers suggestions for other ways in which psychodrama may be used within the prison setting, for example, in dealing with frictions between inmates and guards.

Corsini (1951) notes that during his extensive experience in prison systems "the writer has personally tried several 'brands' of 'methods' of group therapy but has finally discovered that only one method, that of psychodrama, even approaches the effect of deep individual treatment." The author then offers a carefully outlined format for establishing a psychodrama group. Included are rules he established with the group members, and verbatim reports of what was said in order to help establish a working alliance and to build confidence in the psychodramatic method.

Yablonsky (1955) has stressed the importance of preparing parolees to participate in necessary life roles and life situations and has described the part psychodramatic treatment can play in helping them make this transition. Using a clinical vignette, Yablonsky has offered a number of guidelines for using role playing with inmates.

Some research has been done using role playing techniques based on psychodrama in helping prisoners about to be released.

Haskell (January, 1960) has termed this "social reconnection". His study used two groups of sixteen and seventeen prisoners, soon to be released, as well as two matched control groups. The two experimental groups took part in fifteen role-playing sessions before release. The study concluded:

What is apparent from the results is that a group participating in a Role Training Program<sup>4</sup> improved in skill at playing occupational roles. It is reasonable to infer from this fact that general role playing ability improved. There was also evidence of increased tendencies toward conformity. When the improvers in role-playing activity were compared to the non-improver, two important findings appeared. First, the improvers in role playing ability showed a significant increase in tendencies toward conformity, when compared with non-improvers. Second, the improvers showed a substantially lower rate of recidivism after three months of freedom.

While Haskell's study does describe some success with the method, there are several limitations. Most notably is that all of the treatment took place before leaving, and none afterwards. Also noteworthy is the limited number of meetings and the lack of specific description of the content of the sessions.

With this in mind, the intent in this article is to focus on the use of psychodrama with prisoners who leave the institution for a short period of time, then return. This supplies the obvious advantage of rapid feedback and the opportunity to better prepare the prisoner for his next venture.

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In Moreno's early work with the girls of the Hudson School,

<sup>4</sup> "Haskell developed a more structured form of role playing in which the emphasis was on experience in past situations as preparation for action. He called this role training. Techniques developed by Moreno for use in psychodrama were applied." (Haskell, 1961, p. 31). Role training may be further defined as using someone's past experience in a given role, and through the use of psychodramatic techniques, helping him to gain increased spontaneity and expertise in carrying out that role.

he saw the need for training in occupational, family, and community roles. The prisoner in any of the programs which involve partial release for work or family visits must instantaneously warm up to a variety of these roles. One way to facilitate the transition would be an ongoing group led by a therapist trained in psychodramatic methods. Sessions would be structured around each of the above named areas. For example:

A) One ubiquitous problem faced by inmates about to be released is employment. Haskell has noted:

In prison the inmate does not have to find a job. It is considered to be the duty of the officials to provide him with work and the inmate comes to feel he has a right to a job. Foremen in the prison are content with a limited amount of productivity, the standards being far lower than set by foremen and employers outside the prison. Far more cooperation than the inmate is accustomed to give is expected of him by fellow workers, foremen and employers when he works on the outside. (1961, p. 31).

Psychodramatic role training sessions could be structured around the process of finding and keeping a suitable job. Some obvious starting points would be the job interview, explaining the inevitable question of a prison record and why the employer should hire a "con". Through role reversal and modeling (see p.8) the subject has a chance to see how he presents himself and is given the chance to improve his performance, before he is actually doing it "for real". Also within this problem spectrum are the difficulties of the first day on the job, meeting fellow workers, and dealing with bosses.

B) The prisoner visiting his family during and after a prison term has a host of questions and fears about what he will say, how he will behave and how he will be received. Some natural scenes to be rehearsed would be his first meeting with the family, what to say and do during the "quiet time", how to relate to children, and if it is a home release program, how to say goodbye again.

C) Returning to a community, sometimes a familiar one but often times not, is another task which might well be eased by a course of role training and enactment. The prisoner must face

meeting former street friends and decide to what extent he will be involved with them. Frequently he must decide whether he will return to drug use. The man re-entering his community who decides to shun former friends is confronted with the task of building a new set of people with whom he can relate. If he decides to continue old friendships, the task is to try to remain within the boundaries of the law when surrounded by others who may not.

D) A frequent characteristic of those who are imprisoned, and a quality which cuts across all role behavior, is difficulty with impulse control. It is particularly in this area that psychodrama is at times misunderstood.

Psychodrama is just as much a method of restraint as it is a method of expression. The repressiveness of our culture has attached to "expression per se" a value which is often beyond its actual reward. In such methods as role reversal, or enactment of roles which require restraint, retraining and/or reconditioning of excitability lies a greatly underestimated and disregarded application of psychodrama. One thinks here especially of the chronic bad actor in life, the delinquent or psychopath, whose ability for self-restraint has not been strengthened by his warming up to stresses in life. (Moreno, 1969, pp. 235-236).

What is often called for is a re-training of the warm-up to a "hot" issue, one which tends to be particularly provocative and troublesome for that person. Role training sessions can be spent on just these issues, giving the group members a chance to practice self control, and learn behaviors which will be more adaptive.

In role training, a number of techniques are of particular value:

A) In the mirror technique some one is asked to carefully observe the protagonist's behavior. Then the protagonist is asked to step out and let someone else play him, duplicating as nearly as possible his words and actions. He can observe his behavior as a spectator. (This technique puts into action the psychoanalytic concept of the "observing ego"). A discussion

can be initiated as to the quality and effectiveness of his interpersonal behavior. He might want to try another approach, or other group members can be encouraged to step into his shoes and try to deal with the situation. The responses of the auxiliary egos remain the same initially, but may change in accord with the different stimuli they get from a fresh approach.

B) Therapeutic Modeling is a natural derivative of the mirror technique. If a person is unable to modify his own behavior, it is often helpful for him to observe others in a similar situation. The subject is asked to step out of the scene and to allow other group members to demonstrate their method of handling the situation. Afterwards, the subject can be asked to try again, based on what he has seen others do, incorporating those aspects which he feels might be helpful.

C) The Future Projection Technique "involves having the subject act out, with support of auxiliary egos and a group, a meaningful situation in which the subject expects to act in the future. . . An intense, effective warm-up is the essence in the application of this method." (Yablonsky, 1954, p. 303). While one cannot predict the future, everyone carries an internal, preconscious expectation. It is important to make that visible and to help a person prepare for what may be called his "psychic future".

Psychodramatic methods can often be used productively in individual counseling sessions. Role reversal between counselor and client, when carried out nondefensively, often helps clear up misperceptions that occur, and provides each person with an increased awareness of the others perspective. The counselor can also use the methods of future projection, mirroring and modeling to give the inmate direct feedback about his behavior, and an action demonstration of ways he might modify his behavior.

It should again be underscored that the use of the psychodramatic method is likely to be of optimal effectiveness in programs where the prisoners return to the institution after a short excursion to free society, or in rehabilitation programs in which the members have relative freedom. The distinct advantage is the opportunity to test out new role behaviors, and to then examine and redefine these behaviors and their potential

consequences in the setting of a supportive group. While it is helpful for the director to keep in mind the three areas of family, job and community roles, there is little question that as group members begin to see the value afforded by expanding their role behavior to include additional coping styles, offering them a better chance of "making it", they will provide more than ample material for the group to work with.

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