

CLAIMED AND DISCLAIMED ACTION IN PSYCHODRAMA

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The aim of this paper is to explore a new concept in the context of a relatively older situation. The new concept is that of "claimed action" which Schafer (1973) introduced into the psychoanalytic theory. The old situation is psychodrama. Schafer (1973) introduced the concept of disclaimed action indicating that although all human behavior is intentional or goal-directed, we sometimes "claim" credit for our actions and other times we "disclaim" credit for our actions. We either take responsibility for our actions or we delude ourselves into thinking that someone or something is responsible instead of ourselves. This might be another person, God, fate, luck, the system, a part of our psyche, a part of our body, etc.

Examples of disclaimed action are evident in speech. For example, "It was only a dream," can imply that the dreamer does not recognize that we are the creators of our dreams. Of course, "It is only a dream" can also be an expression of relief, that is: "I am glad it was only a dream and not reality." However, when "It was only a dream" means that the dreamer is not thereby responsible in anyway, then it is clearly an example of disclaimed action. Likewise, "Things will work out," when that statement implies that we are not in control of our destiny, is an example of disclaimed action. Of course, the same statement as an expression of hope is not necessarily disclaimed action. In these and other examples of disclaimed action, it is important to take into account the sense of the statement. A statement reflects disclaimed action only when there is some attempt to displace responsibility away from the speaker.

Disclaimed action can have important positive effects. For example, disclaimed action sometimes eases the stress of daily living or makes the speaker more socially appropriate. "It slipped my mind" puts the blame on mind and saves the speaker the discomfort of saying "I forgot our meeting" or "My meeting with you was not a high priority."

Disclaimed and claimed action represent two different styles of verbalizing and feeling about responsibility for behavior. They may be viewed as being on a continuum from a passive position in respect to one's action (disclaimed action) to the other extreme in which one is in an active position in respect to one's action (claimed action).

A caution is in order. Claimed action does not represent a morally superior or psychologically more adaptive style of relating to one's action.

While it is true that most people who get into trouble with themselves and with others err on the side of blindly disclaiming their action, it is true that disclaimed action can also be personally and socially adaptive. Using psychodramatic techniques to study claimed and disclaimed action can give people great perspective and insight and thereby greater freedom in exploring both claimed and disclaimed action.

Schafer (1978) expanded the concept of disclaimed action and pointed out that our familiar locations for failure to exercise self-control are excuses that deflect responsibility from the self and fragment the self into useless divisions. For example, "I was unable to control myself" or "The impulse overwhelmed me."

In a similar vein, the existential psychotherapists write about man's responsibility and how he creates himself rather than being created by external forces. "Man is not a ready-made being; man will become what he makes of himself and nothing more. Man constructs himself through his choices, because he has the freedom to make vital choices, above all the freedom to choose between an 'inauthentic' and an 'authentic' modality of existence. Authentic existence is the modality in which a man assumes the responsibility of his own existence." (Sahakian, 1976: 426).

The goal of more authentic existence, can be related to a model of responsibility, i.e., moving from disclaimed action to claimed action. This will first come in the form of insight, but then must turn into action. When I use the term "insight," I am referring to the term that Greenberg (1968:92) speaks of when he says: "The catharsis can lead directly to insight and the consequent re-organization of some aspect of the psychodramatic patient's world seems obvious when one thinks of the technical employment of this psychological term, the most widely used being that insight refers to new understanding or to a restructuring of the perceptual field."

Using the continuum of disclaimed to claimed action provides a direction for change. It also provides a mode of assessing therapeutic progress with a psychotherapeutic format and within the person's life.

New Exercises

Experimenting with the concept of disclaimed activity in the context of Psychodrama led to a new exercise. At an appropriate time in the action, (usually when there is a loss of direction or when insights about disclaimed action might be useful) the director stops the action and addresses the audience asking if the present action is claimed or disclaimed, or where it might fall on the continuum of claimed and disclaimed action.

The director then asks the protagonist to step aside and to view the action that will follow. This is the *mirror technique*.

The director asks for a volunteer from the audience to mirror for the protagonist and to present "strict" claimed action in the situation that was developed by the protagonist. "Strict" claimed action would represent claimed action at the most extreme position on the continuum of claimed-disclaimed action. "Strict" disclaimed action would represent disclaimed action at the most extreme other end of the continuum. Following that, the director asks for another volunteer from the audience to mirror for the protagonist and to present "strict" disclaimed action within the same context.

The protagonist is asked to judge the two mirror presentations of strict claimed and strict disclaimed action. The protagonist will then be given the opportunity to reenact the scene utilizing the mirrored action in an attempt to find a better solution to his problem.

The protagonist sometimes rejects these new alternatives. When this occurs, he is encouraged to try out the new possibility of claimed action even if it seems incorrect or uncomfortable. The protagonist might want to try out both possibilities and then combine the two of them. He may dislike the entire approach and return to his previous methods. The ideal situation would be one in which the protagonist recognizes how he has disclaimed his action. This insight often comes in a sudden flash. He will then be able to reenact the scene claiming responsibility for what he was previously not able to claim responsibility for in the past.

Blatner (1973) talks about the concept of the divided double in which one or more auxiliaries are assigned to play a specific role or part of the protagonist's psyche. It frees the protagonist to clarify his feelings about other complementary attitudes. This is similar to the technique suggested here. The caution in the divided double and in the current exercise is that the protagonist must understand that he is an integrated whole and that these are merely different ways in which he thinks. They are not actually different parts of the mind.

Role Training

To facilitate the audience's ability to see disclaimed action and to be able to spontaneously invent "strict" claimed and disclaimed action, the group has to be taught how to distinguish the two modes of action. This is done through warmup techniques in which the director sets the scene and selects persons to present both claimed and disclaimed action. The director should choose incidents which will be meaningful to the group and then instruct the members in their contrasting roles. After the presenta-

tion of both actions, the actions should be discussed to see if the group understood the differences. Then another situation should be used with other members playing the roles of the "strict" claimer or disclaimer. Recognizing the difficulty of the concept, it is best used with an on-going group and should be presented in several sessions. The warmup part of the time is spent sharing instances from the group's lives in which members recognized their use of disclaimed action.

A few examples might clarify the concept and the techniques. A student who has cheated on an exam might represent his action in this way. "I just couldn't help it. My eyes were wandering and I just saw the right answer on another student's paper. Anybody would have done the same thing." The student here is putting the responsibility for his cheating on his "wandering eyes" and on what "anybody" would have done. Claimed action in this situation would sound something like this: "I started to look around to see other people's papers. When I saw that someone next to me had an obviously correct answer, I copied it." Here the student takes the responsibility for the "looking" and for the copying.

Another example would be a person explaining why he had been late for a meeting. Disclaiming the action the person might say, "I couldn't get here on time because the traffic held me up and the parking places were all taken." The responsibility here is shunted off to the "traffic" and those thoughtless drivers who took up all of the parking places. Claiming responsibility in such a situation need differ only in recognizing that the speaker might have anticipated both the traffic and the parking problems: "I didn't leave enough time to deal with the traffic and I did not leave time for parking."

Note, from the examples, that claimed action is not necessarily more or less dramatic than is disclaimed action; neither is it more or less "moral" than disclaimed action. However, note that in the examples above, like in the next example, claimed action is more likely to clear the air of confusion and point to a clearer discussion of issues. For example, a woman, talking to a marriage counselor about how disappointed she is in her sex life, might say, "He works nights and I work days. There is just no time for sex anymore." This is disclaimed action. An example of claimed action in the same situation would be something like, "I don't enjoy sex enough to make time for it."

The director should provide participants with specific roles until they are sufficiently familiar with the concept to invent them independently or to find examples in their everyday life.

Teaching this concept of claimed and disclaimed action will also serve the purpose of giving the audience something specific to focus on in their observation of the psychodrama. Although the audience is ideally supposed to be involved in the psychodrama, members may tend to fade out

if the pace of the action is slow, or if the participants are tired, or if they do not relate easily to the subject of the presentation. Having a tool with which to delve into the thinking styles of the protagonist and the auxiliaries would facilitate the audience in giving its attention to the action.

Since the audience is such an important component of psychodrama, it is useful to help the audience study itself during and after the psychodrama. Schauer (1952) suggests that the protagonist be ignored and the focus be on the audience as the principal patient. There is probably no need or benefit, but rather the potential of harm in ignoring the protagonist; however, a great deal of attention can be paid to the audience by the director and an audience analyst. Claimed and disclaimed action is but one of many different techniques that could be introduced to the audience to aid them in their concentration and to help them get more personal benefit from the psychodrama.

Conclusion

Concepts having to do with action and the role of action as performed or as represented internally are especially compatible with psychodramatic techniques. Schafer's concept of claimed action represents not only a contribution by one of psychoanalytic theory's outstanding theorists but also represents a greater awareness within psychoanalytic theory of the problem of "action." This holds out promise for continued cross-fertilization between psychodrama and psychoanalytic theory.

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The authors are indebted to Professor M. J. Heisey for his training, support, suggestions and inspiration in writing this paper.

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