Warming-Up, Action Methods, and Related Processes

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The idea of warming-up did not start only with Moreno. Other pioneers of spontaneity training and further applications deserve recognition. Some new books on warm-up techniques and new developments in neuroscience invite a reconsideration of this fundamental dynamic in psychology.

KEYWORDS: Spontaneity; theatre games; improvisation; J. L. Moreno; Viola Spolin.

The dynamics of spontaneity have been the focus of increasing numbers of people in psychiatry and psychology in the last century, and certainly this process was core to Moreno's interests. He was prescient in connecting spontaneity to creativity and both of these to a particularly healing and vitalizing dynamic in human life.

Warming-up involves the process of people increasing their spontaneity level, individually or as a group. *Spontaneity* is the psychological dynamic in which ideas flow into consciousness from the higher centers in the form of intuitions, integrations, emotional nudges, images, words, music, and the like. *Improvisation* is the implementation in action of spontaneity. *Creativity* is a general category that includes all these dynamics. (After pondering innumerable writings with often inconsistent explanations, this is my own simplified summary.)

While Moreno was one of the pioneers of the use of action techniques for experiential learning, he was not the only innovator. This was an idea whose time had come. Others, too, were exploring the idea of improvisation in drama and the other arts—and these will be noted later.

As for Moreno, he might have used various techniques for warming-up a group as the first phase of a psychodrama, but he also wrote about the tactic of the leader just waiting, doing nothing special, which ironically was what was done typically by more psychoanalytically oriented group therapists (Moreno, 1953, p. lxviii). Nor did Moreno himself write much about different kinds of warm-ups;

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and descriptions of techniques specifically for warming-up a group—with a few exceptions (such as Cornyetz, 1947)—did not begin to appear until around the later 1960s (Blatner, 1970; Robbins, 1973; Weiner and Sacks, 1969).

Others have written more about the general dynamics of the warming-up process specifically in psychodrama; my concern in this paper is for how warm-ups and other structured experiences have come to be used as a starter for non-psychodrama groups, some of these more educational than therapeutic.

For example, that a workshop consisting of an intermixing of action experiences and discussion could serve as a useful basis for teaching practical psychology was impressed on me by Leon Fine, PhD, one of the pioneers of psychodrama at the St. Louis State Hospital and then later in Portland, OR. He had come down to central California where I was in training as a resident in psychiatry and offered such a workshop. In addition to learning a lot about nonverbal communications and other dynamics, I was impressed with this format as a way to learn by doing.

Around that time, in the later 1960s, the encounter group movement also used many action methods as warm-ups to discussion. The point here is that the idea of warming-up had already transcended the field of psychodrama.

Elsewhere, Viola Spolin had developed theatre games in California in the late 1930s. She first adapted these to older children and then in the early 1960s, with her son, Paul Sills, extended these activities to the training of improvisers at Second City in Chicago. From there, warm-ups and theatre games expanded in many directions; they are now being used as a method to train people in business and other organizations to be more innovative. Indeed, in many quarters Viola Spolin is recognized as the key pioneer in theatre games rather than Moreno.

Along another cultural stream, sensitivity training expanded from its origins in the T-Group in the later 1940s and came to be applied in businesses. The pioneers of this approach were influenced by Moreno as well as Kurt Lewin, and used role-playing and other action approaches as well as discussion. In turn, these mixtures of warm-ups and talk evolved into the "encounter groups" of the later 1960s and 1970s, and beyond that into a wide range of experiential learning workshops in many fields.

A fourth stream arose from the efforts of Augusto Boal in Brazil and Argentina to fight political and economic oppression. Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" later came to be used for a wide variety of personal and more subtle social problems. As part of this approach to theatre, Boal also developed a goodly number of "games" (1993). He had some exposure to psychodrama in Brazil in the 1960s, and I do not doubt that many of his ideas were influenced ultimately by Moreno. Certainly his technique of "Forum Theatre" is similar to how role-playing was used in education and business at least ten to twenty years before. This Theatre of the Oppressed approach has also continued to spread internationally, even following Boal's death a few years ago.

A fifth channel of development was the work of E. Paul Torrance (1915–2003) and the whole field of creativity research and development. Torrance was also influenced by Moreno in the late 1940s and went on to advocate the use of sociodrama, among his many other ideas.

Sixth, the field of drama in education spread from England and Australia and is now international. Pioneers such as Peter Slade, Richard Courtney, and Dorothy Heathcote got children learning about life by imagining themselves to be in interesting situations. Warm-ups from creative drama also became part of this approach.

Seventh, in the spirit of the aforementioned workshop of Dr. Fine, experiential classes about psychology are now being promoted as a form of preventive mental hygiene. Fitch and Marshall's anthology (2011) presents a variety of workers, some of whom use action techniques as a way to develop resilience in college students.

Eighth, improvisation was woven into a continuing but slow development of drama as part of the early curriculum—"creative drama." This emerged independently of the drama-in-education movement because it focused on just learning the component skills of drama. Even though these are further developed in the scripted-rehearsed format in later school experiences, some activities that are closer to warm-ups are part of this trend.

Ninth, just as drama therapy shifted from supporting the production of scripted and rehearsed plays in the late 1960s and integrated the ideas of Moreno—so that now much of what is done in drama therapy is in part improvised—so, too, warm-up techniques were integrated and then created by this field, which took on a new energy in the 1970s (Emunah, 1994).

Tenth, improvisation as a recreational activity in itself became more prevalent. The infiltration of the aforementioned theatre games into most middle- and high-school drama classes was accompanied by a growing awareness that these games could be played at increasing levels of skill. The Canadian Improvisation Games and institutions such as TheatreSportz spread in the 1980s through the present. There is now an Applied Improvisation Network that involves hundreds of theatre artists internationally who consult with business and organizations, using warm-ups as catalysts of team building and innovation.

Eleventh, improv has become one of the modalities used for mass entertainment. A show hosted by Drew Carey titled *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* was popular on television in the 1990s, and has recently been restarted as *Improv-A-Ganza*. Meanwhile, scores of books and websites have proliferated, with thousands of what we used to call warm-ups. People now take improv classes just for fun, and there are stand-up nights at comedy clubs that challenge volunteers to respond to suggestions from the audience.

In short, warm-up activities have now intermixed with theatre games and other "starters" (or what in the 1940s were called ice breakers as parlor games) and are now known by many other terms—action methods, psychodramatic techniques, experiential learning, structured activities, encounter games, and so forth.

What this has led to is the emergence of spontaneity development as an end in itself, apart from any therapeutic or specific educational goal. My work with my wife Allee on developing the *Art of Play* also went in this direction. The point of this article is to remind our community that the art of devising, modifying, and sequencing warm-ups can stand as a form of applied group leadership in itself. Whether used to teach a class on intercultural sensitivity, as practical human

relations training, or as a way to develop and express creativity, this skill in knowing about and orchestrating a broad repertoire of growth games can in turn be taught to teachers of drama in education or the expressive arts, drama therapists, psychotherapists, managers, medical professionals, and other people-helpers. And again—just for emphasis—we should not underestimate the field of recreation. Dramatic techniques just for fun offer a set of skills and attitudes that are especially relevant to an emerging culture in which the capacity to be innovative is more valued than merely skill at dumbly following instructions.

RECENT BOOKS

There have been scores of books on various types of theatre games, types of role-playing, and so forth, and hundreds of articles. Whole websites are now available with lists of thousands of experiential exercises. Psychodramatists with some sensitivity to both action methods and group dynamics are in a good position to learn more about how such techniques can be introduced and woven together, and may be better able to devise new applications.

I was especially impressed with Jeanie Lindheim's recent *Trusting the Moment* (2010). First of all, she addresses the broad range of people who might use these methods, which is part of what my point is in this article—it goes way beyond psychodrama! Indeed, I think the first sentence in Moreno's magnum opus, *Who Shall Survive* (1953), is: "A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind." I interpret that sentence this way: Any aspect of theory or complex of techniques that might be recognized as a tool for consciousness raising can and should be applied to any context where it can be of use, whether that be educational, business, recreational, or political. In this sense, the very idea of warming-up, the concept of spontaneity and the benefits of its development, and the techniques for achieving it, all deserve the widest possible range of implementations. So Lindheim's book and the others might best be viewed as serving this wider goal. Her introductory comments also suggest that what is needed is not merely a throwing together of various techniques but rather a suggestion of the art that is involved in constructing the choice and sequence of experiences, how they should be set up, and what kind of follow-up is most suitable, considering the size and purpose of the group.

Zoomy Zoomy: Improv Games and Exercises for Groups, a 148-page paperback, is another recently published book. Written by Hanna Fox (2010), it is full of intriguing exercises that offer an excellent introduction and a listing of structured activities that further illustrate the themes being discussed in this article. Fox is the daughter of Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas, the inventors of Playback Theatre, and she wrote a chapter on Playback Theatre for my anthology *Interactive & Improvisational Drama*. Her book offers games that generally fall into a variety of functional categories: openers, physical and vocal warm-ups, team building, longer activities, and closing activities. Although the book is not a teaching manual, the opening pages do offer ideas for working with groups that are relevant for any group leader who wants to work in action modalities. Thus, *Zoomy Zoomy* is a good addition to the library of any people wanting to broaden their repertoire of available techniques.

From our own field of psychodrama, Linda Condon (2010) has revised and expanded her *Warm-Up Ring* and Pam Van der Laan (2011) has recently published her *Therapist Playbook*. These further demonstrate the creativity of people in developing or collating warm-ups.

Three notable books about techniques more designed for younger people not only offer a listing of games but also comment on how they may be wisely utilized in different group settings (Chasen, 2009; Lobman and Lundquist, 2007; Polsky et al., 2006). A more complete listing is on my website supplement to the chapter on warming-up in my 2007 anthology.

Since one of my interests is the whole challenge of spontaneity and imagination development, these collections seem significant in a couple ways:

- They offer a type of wholesome recreation, and a way to socialize with noncompetitive games; in my opinion, there is a great need for such activities.
- They suggest to me that there is a major segment of the theatre arts that has yet to become a prominent part of major drama textbooks—the use not of scripted and rehearsed drama but of drama-like activities that are not scripted, not rehearsed, and more interactive. In that form, they become less of an art form and more of a type of experiential education, personal development, social consciousness raising, and community building.

NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL FINDINGS

The dynamics of warming-up overlap with our growing understanding of the nature of spontaneity as a fundamental dynamic in individuals and society. On my website I have added new thoughts (Blatner, 2011). Warming-up involves the generation of the energies of spontaneity, a willingness to be open to inspiration from the creative sources in (and beyond?) the brain. These are mixed with a general energizing of interest, a focusing of attention, and a relaxing of habitual patterns of defense. Spontaneity in this regard is the opposite of a state of fight or flight, a state of arousal of the midbrain's limbic system of interconnected structures.

However, the mind has priorities: Self-protection dominates. States of negative emotion—fear, shame, guilt, anger—are stronger than more subtle states of positive emotion, such as interest, excitement, and enjoyment. For the latter to emerge, people have to feel safe with each other, and warming-up must include that as a goal. In states of oppression and fear, you can make yourself "tote that barge, lift that bale," and even memorize; but acts of creativity, if they occur, are really just acts of desperation that happened to work. In general, creativity is more reliably promoted through the process of warming-up, a process that requires a settling down of anxiety.

APPLICATIONS

In general, then, warming-up as an activity in itself, apart from psychodrama, has considerable value. Techniques for warming-up can be used to raise consciousness,

sensitize group members to their feelings and perceptions, build group cohesion, and so forth. Other purposes also include the following:

- They can be woven together to promote psychological-mindedness and then people can discuss what it was like to use them. (I have found that about 1 person out of 5 is deeply touched by a given warm-up exercise, so that a series of five exercises tends to evoke significant sharing from almost everyone in the group.)
- Some may be used just to build group cohesion and establish a greater sense of trust and playfulness, following which more creative explorations can follow—for example, sociodrama, Theatre of the Oppressed, and so forth.
- Some may be used just to develop spontaneity as a part of a holistic curriculum, perhaps in the same sense as doing physical exercises or yoga stretching early in the day's program.
- Others can be used more for closing, developing a sense of tighter group cohesion after a day at camp or in a program that has been about other endeavors but has an important component of social bonding (e.g., a church youth retreat).
- Some dramatic forms of spontaneity building may open into other arts and creative or expressive activities—a mixed arts-therapy workshop, dance, dance-drama, or some other program.

These activities can be mixed also with a workshop handout or brief didactic talk about how and why spontaneity is an important element in life. I view these as transcending therapy. Of course they can be used as an adjunctive part of a therapeutic program, for recreational therapy, and so on. (Of course warming-up and exercises can still be used for deeper therapeutic work in psychodramas! But that is not the point being made here.)

Ideally, we should learn to be more open in general, beyond drama per se, to improvising our singing, dancing, making faces, playing with words, playing with our pets, playing with our children, making love, and even planning rituals and exercising our spirituality. It can be very subtle, very low key—it need not be boisterous. The key is to know that you can do it, that it can be done; you can warm yourself up, you can take your time. This enhances vitality significantly. Most people have lost most of this—they do not know it exists, they do not know they can learn to do it, to open to natural energy flows, to tap in and expand. It is nothing magical. Children do it all the time.

If we can help to spread the technique of warming oneself up, and warming-up groups, and developing spontaneity, that alone would significantly advance the wonderfulness in the world.

Warming-up, then, should not be considered just an element in psychodrama—although it has been well described in that function (Blatner, 1996; Leveton, 2001). warming-up should be recognized beyond the treatment context as an important and natural element in psychology. The trend in the last twenty years towards positive psychology reinforces this. People become interested, excited, and motivated. They feel relaxed a bit more: Their midbrain

defensive reactive processes decrease, which in turns opens the mind to the creative input from their higher brain. They feel more trust in expressing themselves with others because others have disclosed their own areas of vulnerability and indicated their own willingness to withhold judgment and offer support. The whole enterprise enters to some degree a greater set of play—an understanding that behaviors are to be taken "as if," in a more exploratory, provisional sense, which in turn releases even more support from others. There is a dash of fun included here too, as if to say, "Let's just see what happens next."

People who have been involved in psychodrama and improvisation tend to become used to this shift, but many people hardly know it exists. It comes and goes in real life, but few know how to consciously harness it. We should not take warming-up for granted. In real life, sadly, many situations almost operate as if warming-up were not a natural process. When you step into the classroom, be prepared for a pop quiz. When you enter the doctor's office, be prepared to give a clear history. And in turn, many people come to expect a fully prepared presentation from others.

Or we avoid the whole challenge and flail around: Most people do not know how to set up a warm-up so they can draw others out gracefully and more fully—it cannot be hurried, but neither need we unconsciously avoid the effort and stay at the level of small talk. A fuller consideration of the nature of how warming-up and cooling down occur and fails to occur, or are stopped from occurring, could lead to another article. The point is that it is bigger than psychodrama itself.

The implications of all this parallel those in some other articles I have written about how other of Moreno's contributions may be applied quite beyond the context of psychodrama or sociodrama. Just as sociometry can be used in many ways beyond the therapeutic—say, in how a summer camp is structured—so too warming-up can be a theme that is woven into everyday life.

SUMMARY

Recognizing the concept of warming-up is an important element in the general activities surrounding the advancement of consciousness. It includes the more subtle dynamics of mind that are revealed when the stronger emotions of fear are removed. If the only contribution of Moreno to the culture that caught on was the recognition of the value and nature of warming-up, as well as some ideas about how to go about it, that alone would be a great addition to the evolution of human consciousness. Warming-up is a meaningful activity in itself, apart from how it is used.

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