

A Proposed Definition of Psychodrama

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ABSTRACT. Psychodrama does not have a consistent definition, which tends to cause problems, especially when conducting empirical research. This paper discusses some of the reasons for this and suggests a definition that may be agreed upon by a majority of investigators and practitioners. The definition suggested is procedural, rather than theoretical, which allows for a wide range of views about psychodrama, including those of people who are not purely Morenean.

FEW WORDS ARE AS AMBIGUOUS as the term *psychodrama*. It is so multifaceted and complex that reviews of the literature show little agreement on its definition. The term is loosely used to connote, for example, clinical role playing, behavioral rehearsal, action analysis, creative dramatics, improvisatory theater, and even spontaneous happening. Simple definitions of psychodrama, such as the “science which explores the ‘truth’ by dramatic methods” (Moreno, 1972, p. a), or the “theory, philosophy, and methodology of J. L. Moreno” (Fine, 1979, p. 428), are insufficient. By the same token, stating that psychodrama cannot be clearly defined because of its reliance on personal experience is unacceptable.

A brief and precise definition of psychodrama is important for a number of reasons. First, when investigating the process or the outcome of psychodrama, a precise definition is necessary in order to distinguish this approach from others. Second, when introducing psychodrama to clients and to society at large, a brief definition would help clarify what one may, or may not, expect. Third, a commonly agreed-upon definition would facilitate discussions between practitioners of diverse persuasions.

The present paper draws attention to the problem of definition, discusses some of the reasons for this problem, and suggests a comprehensive definition that may be agreed upon by a majority of investigators and practitioners.

I believe there are five main reasons for the problem of defining psychodrama. They will be discussed here under the headings of history, triadic system, eclecticism, application, and theory.

History

The problem of definition has its origin in the formulations of J. L. Moreno. While brilliant in their creativeness, Moreno's definitions of psychodrama are often inconsistent and contradictory. For example, psychodrama was defined by him as a theology with religious postulations (Moreno, 1920), as a dramatic art form with aesthetic ideals (Moreno, 1923), as a political system with social values (Moreno, 1953), as a science with research ambitions (Moreno, 1953), as a method of psychotherapy with curative goals (Moreno, 1959), and as a philosophy of life. Even when taking the various phases of development in the genesis of psychodrama into consideration, nothing close to a consistent psychodramatic paradigm remains. It is my position that psychodrama should be defined not as a theology, a dramatic art form, a political system, a science, or a way of life. Psychodrama is a specific method of psychotherapy, a treatment approach to many psychological problems.

Triadic System

A second source of confusion is Moreno's frequently quoted "triadic system," consisting of sociometry, group psychotherapy, and psychodrama. One may question whether sociometry and group psychotherapy are inherent parts of the psychodramatic system or are separate methods that may, or may not, be employed, according to the orientation of the practitioner. It is my position that while sociometry and group psychotherapy often represent important elements in psychodrama therapy, they are not inherent parts of it and should therefore be conceptually separated from psychodrama proper.

Eclecticism

A third obstacle when defining psychodrama is its eclectic character and its similarity to treatment approaches such as fixed role therapy (Kelly, 1955), social model learning (Bandura, 1965), gestalt therapy (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1973), encounter group (Schutz, 1971), and other related action methods. It is my position that many approaches may include one or another ingredient from psychodrama, but none of them encompasses the entire system, as described below, and so cannot be defined as psychodrama.

Application

A fourth reason for the ambiguous definition of psychodrama is the failure of many practitioners to distinguish between therapeutic and non-therapeutic applications of this approach. Therapeutic applications would include professionally trained clinicians who attempt to treat more or less disturbed individuals. In contrast, nontherapeutic applications would include some experiential activity for healthy people who participate for growth, pastime, training, or some other reason. While drama may be a healing experience, and while psychotherapy may be dramatically entertaining, psychodrama cannot be characterized simply as theater. No matter how much we attempt to dilute what is done in psychodrama, it is definitely a form of treatment.

Theory

The fact that most definitions of psychodrama include some reference to theory is a fifth cause for disagreement. The terminology of psychodrama remains obscure, and practitioners lack a coherent theory to aid in their struggle for conceptual existence. It is my position that psychodrama should be defined in a way that does not assume a specific theoretical orientation. Such a definition should include not what the intentions are or what is achieved, but a procedural description of what a psychodrama director actually does.

Operational definitions are necessary, particularly in empirical research. According to Kipper (1978), such definitions may be either narrow or wide. A narrow definition requires the enactment of at least one scene or the use of at least one technique. A wide definition requires the enactment of at least three scenes and the use of more than one technique. Furthermore, operational definitions may be supplemented by a description of the psychodramatic process.

Kipper (1986) proposed a solution to the problem of definition by defining psychodrama as the clinical application of a general model that he called the behavioral simulation model. Briefly, this model claims that psychodrama is a method in which the client is placed in a new environment where real-life situations are presented and inner experiences are made concrete. According to this definition, the essential characteristic of psychodrama is the reproduction, by the client, of his or her day-to-day world in a therapeutic environment. While this is one of the more successful attempts to construct a definition to which most practitioners may agree, it lacks the phenomenological aspect of psychodrama as the existential experience of being in the here and now.

A Comprehensive Definition of Psychodrama

With the above-mentioned issues as a point of departure, I propose the following as a comprehensive definition of psychodrama:

Psychodrama is a method of psychotherapy in which clients are encouraged to continue and complete their actions through dramatization, role playing, and dramatic self-presentation. Both verbal and nonverbal communications are utilized. A number of scenes are enacted, depicting, for example, memories of specific happenings in the past, unfinished situations, inner dramas, fantasies, dreams, preparations for future risk-taking situations, or simply unrehearsed expressions of mental states in the here and now. These scenes approximate real-life situations or are externalizations of mental processes from within. If required, other parts may be taken by group members or by inanimate objects. Many techniques are employed, such as role reversal, doubling, mirroring, concretizing, maximizing, and soliloquy. Usually, the phases of warm up, action, working-through, closure, and sharing can be identified.

The main advantage of this definition is that it makes it possible to characterize various applications and styles according to the following dimensions:

1. Setting—individual, group, family, or milieu;
2. Focus—person, group, or theme centered;
3. Location—in situ, stage, school, hospital, clinic;
4. Adherence—Morenean, Freudian, Adlerian, Rogerian;
5. Underlying theory—psychodramatic, psychoanalytic, behavioral, existential, humanistic;
6. Therapeutic goal—symptom reduction, crisis intervention, conflict resolution, personality change;
7. Therapist's intervention—directive, supportive, confrontative, re-constructive, expressive, interpretative;
8. Therapeutic factors emphasized—emotional release, cognitive insight, interpersonal feedback, behavioral learning;
9. Time and frequency of sessions—periodic, continual, single session, marathon, time-limited;
10. Population treated—age, diagnosis, sex.

Unfortunately, psychodrama has become a field in which some who call themselves practitioners of psychodrama cannot accept others who share the same label. Not only are there conflicting underlying theories, there are also different therapeutic goals and interventions to reach those goals. It is my hope that the definition suggested here will help unite practitioners of diverse persuasions within one common framework.

This framework would allow for a wide range of theoretical views about psychodrama, including those that are not purely Morenean.

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