

A Survey of Psychodramatic Action and Closure Techniques

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ABSTRACT. Estimates of the number of psychodramatic techniques range between 200 (Haskell, 1975) and 300 (Z. Moreno, 1966; Greenberg, 1974). This article brings together published psychodramatic techniques that are designed to stimulate protagonists during the action (self-disclosure) phase of a psychodrama. Also included are the closure techniques to shut-down the action and allow protagonist(s) and group members to enter the sharing phase of the psychodramatic process. Because of space limitations, only brief illustrations of each technique are offered, followed by specific references for a more comprehensive description of the technique.

THIS COMPENDIUM OF PUBLISHED psychodrama techniques can serve as a ready reference for practitioners of group psychotherapy, psychodrama, and sociometry. The categorization of approaches entitled action and closure techniques may be somewhat arbitrary because most techniques, with appropriate modification, can be used in any phase of a psychodrama session. Alterations of a technique are not listed as separate techniques (i.e., not given a separate number) but are described as variations of the technique.

Action Techniques to Facilitate a Protagonist

Action techniques are designed to facilitate the movement of the protagonist(s), as well as group members, from the initial verbal (warm-up) phase to the action component of a psychodrama. Some techniques are meant to prepare protagonist(s) to identify a conflict and move into the enactment phase. Other techniques are very specific and take place within the enactment phase.

1. Autogenic Warm-up. Rothman (1961) describes the use of the self-hypnotic techniques to put a selected protagonist into a slight trance.

Rothman did not elaborate on the procedures for this technique. Enneis (1950) also has described the use of hypnosis with a protagonist before moving into action. Enneis cautions that suitable training is needed before a director can use hypnosis.

A variation of this technique is Hypnodrama. This procedure requires hypnotic induction on stage or in the center circle. When the protagonist is in a trance, the use of psychodramatic techniques are employed to carry out the drama (Supple, 1962; Greenberg, 1974).

2. Initial Interview. Interviews are helpful in obtaining biographical and background information from the protagonist. In this process, the director, protagonist, and the group are warming up to the conflict to be enacted. The director's main objective is to present the problem in a concrete form, locate its place in time, and have the protagonist recall who was present (Schramski, 1979). When this is achieved, the director is ready to develop the scene, and strategies, in terms of significant others, color of the room(s), memorable sounds, furniture, important objects, time of the situation, clothing he or she was wearing, posture (sitting, standing, etc.), and protagonist's mood (past and present).

A variation of this procedure is the Role-Taking Interview designed for adolescents in crisis. After rapport has been established, the following sequence is suggested: (a) identify significant people in the adolescent's social atom, (b) establish a criterion for the role-taking exercise, (c) facilitate the assumption of the role, (d) interview the adolescent in the role, and (e) note patterns and discrepancies (Altman, 1985).

3. Role Reversal With Significant Others. The director has the protagonist introduce his or her significant other(s) to the group by assuming that role. As themes and conflicts emerge, auxiliaries are selected to explore the protagonist's conflict further (Z. T. Moreno, 1959).

4. Auxiliary Ego Techniques. The auxiliaries may be chosen by the protagonist or appointed, based on sociometric information, by the director in order to assist the director with the psychodramatic process (Goldman, 1984). Auxiliaries may take any role—for example, significant other (father, mother, lover), objects (clock), emotions (fear, anger, openness), mirror of self, or a double. The following are shortened descriptions of auxiliary ego techniques.

- The *mirror* technique involves having an auxiliary assume the identity of the protagonist and reproduce his or her behaviors. When using a mirror, the protagonist is asked to step aside and observe the mirror. This is useful in having the protagonist examine his or her own behaviors by way of the auxiliary (Z. T. Moreno, 1959).

- The *double* aids the protagonist in expressing ideas, thoughts, and feelings that she or he is experiencing but is unable to express in words. This includes reproducing the protagonist's nonverbal behaviors (gestures and body mannerisms). At times, the double, taking cues from the protagonist's verbal and nonverbal expressions, might express thoughts and feelings (positive or negative) that the protagonist might be blocking. Typically, the double stands close, either directly behind or alongside of the protagonist in order to observe nonverbal cues carefully. The protagonist may, of course, choose to validate or invalidate his or her double's statements. A double's task is to provide the protagonist with needed support by empathetic communication. Thus, the double stimulates, supports, clarifies, and aids in giving suggestions and interpretations to the protagonist (J. L. Moreno, 1953; Blatner, 1973).
- *Drafting* is used when a double (usually a trained person) is chosen to assist or coach a weak protagonist by encouraging, developing, and enacting situations whereby the protagonist is pulled into the action. It is the director's responsibility to ensure that the double will not dominate or replace the protagonist with his or her own projections or conflicts (J. L. Moreno, 1952; Z. T. Moreno, 1959; Weiner and Sacks, 1969; Greenberg, 1974).
- *Multiple doubles* help the protagonist express two or more aspects of his or her identity. For example, one double represents the protagonist as the overconfident salesperson, another double portrays him as the submissive husband, and a third double depicts him as an angry father. The primary purpose is to add clarity to the protagonist's dilemma (Z. T. Moreno, 1959; Blatner, 1973; Greenberg, 1974).
- The *reformed auxiliary ego* technique is employed when a protagonist displays intense hatred, anger, or fear toward a significant other. The director explains that the auxiliary ego is a reformed significant other who makes no apologies and expresses no undue guilt feelings but expresses an interest in the protagonist's past emotions. The auxiliary conveys the attitude that the past cannot be changed, but it would be possible to start a new relationship. It may be useful to have the protagonist reverse roles with the reformed other (Sacks, 1973).
- The *auxiliary world* technique is effective with hallucinatory and delusional individuals. The director has auxiliaries assume the roles that are a part of the protagonist's hallucinatory and delusional world. The auxiliary world technique attempts to shape the natural environment around the inner world of the patient (Moreno, 1945; Blatner, 1984).
- The *silent auxiliary ego* technique is a method for treating deteriorated mental patients. Marion Smith (1950) described the use of this

technique (suggested by J. L. Moreno to Smith) when treating regressed mental patients. This procedure “uses gentle gestures in place of words, tries to motivate the patients to occupy herself (*sic*) constructively and surrounds them with an atmosphere of optimism” (p. 92).

- The *divided double*, often referred to as the contrary double, involves two auxiliaries playing contradictory parts of the protagonist’s psyche (Rabson, 1979).
- The *ideal other* is a technique employed to reduce the protagonist’s tension during the closure phase of the psychodrama. The *other* refers to the protagonist’s significant other, that is, brother, sister, mother, father, and so on; the *ideal other* is the wished-for significant other whom the protagonist never experienced. This *ideal other* is a fantasy-type replacement for the *other* in reality (Greenberg, 1974).
- *Spontaneous double* incidences involve the audience. Instead of the director or protagonist selecting the double(s), the director invites members from the audience (group) to double when they feel empathic with the protagonist. This can occur anytime during the psychodrama. This technique is not used in classical Morenean psychodrama (Rabson, 1979).

5. The Auxiliary Chair. This is commonly referred to as the empty-chair technique (Greenberg, 1974). A chair (or multiple chairs) is assigned the role(s) of a significant other(s) or part(s) of oneself (confident, shy, etc.). The chair(s) serves as a neutral auxiliary ego(s), in the sense that it is easy to talk to or to project onto, and the participants are not influenced by the personality characteristics of a live auxiliary ego(s) (Lippit, 1958; Warner, 1970). The protagonist may also reverse roles with the significant other(s) symbolized by the empty chair(s).

Lippit (1958) observed that this technique is useful with children and adults who are sensitive to the presence of live auxiliaries. The director stands behind the chair to facilitate the process of projection by asking questions relevant to the conflict. The process of projection may be facilitated by the use of such behavioral names as “agg” for aggression, “snu” for snobbishness. The director demonstrates the behaviors characterized by these chairs, moves the chairs, sets the emotional tone, and asks questions pertaining to these behaviors for group discussion. The chair(s) provide a vent for emotions; the chair(s) can be hugged, pushed, hit, or kicked (Starr, 1979).

6. High Chair. The protagonist is seated on a chair that is located in such a manner that she or he has the sense of being taller or higher than other members in the group. Alternatively, the protagonist may be asked

to stand on a chair to make him or her feel more powerful in dealing with authority figures (Greenberg, 1974; Starr, 1979).

7. Chairing. This technique is used when the participant expresses two or more opposing directions to take regarding any interpersonal situation. Chairs are used to represent each alternative. The protagonist reverses role with each chair, and the director interviews him or her in that role. This technique is helpful in decision making (Vander May, 1981).

8. Dream Technique. The protagonist enacts a dream rather than explain the various details. This allows him or her the opportunity to organize the dream as it is presently recalled and to select auxiliaries to represent the characters in his or her dream (Z. Moreno, 1959; Weiner and Sacks, 1969; Greenberg, 1974).

9. Maximizing. The director uses auxiliaries to exaggerate an emotion(s) that the protagonist is suppressing (Blatner, 1973; Rabson, 1979).

10. Concretization. This technique forces the protagonist, with the aid of auxiliary ego(s), to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings in a concrete form. It provides the director and the protagonist with a visual blueprint of feelings that are usually central to inter- and intrapersonal relationship situations that were not being overtly stated (Rabson, 1979; Heisey, 1982).

11. Role Reversal. This method has the protagonist exchange roles with a significant other(s) or significant aspects of oneself that are in conflict. A director may choose to interview the protagonist in reversed roles or have the protagonist interact with himself or herself in the various roles. This variation is referred to as the interview in Role Reversal (Vander May, 1981).

Role reversal is useful in obtaining information about a significant other (or parts of self), as perceived by the protagonist, to facilitate the work of the auxiliaries and the director. In the role of the significant other (or a part of the self), the protagonist is likely to experience what it is like to be in the other roles and can possibly gain another viewpoint of his or her own roles in conflict (Haskill, 1975).

12. Role Reversal With the Director. This technique is effective in aiding the protagonist's development of internal controls that are essential in setting goals, making decisions, and generally controlling one's life (Vander May, 1981).

13. The Substitute Role Technique. This procedure involves working with resistant protagonists who are experiencing conflicts with significant others. The purpose is to have the protagonist reverse roles with a significant other. The director has him or her carry on a conversation with another significant other with whom there is limited or no conflict. This gives the director, the group, and the auxiliaries vital information and allows the protagonist a chance to relax his or her defenses. After

various interactions, the protagonist may be led, in his or her role, to interact and explore conflict(s) with the specific significant other with whom there is serious conflict (Parrish, 1953).

14. *The Soliloquy*. The protagonist is instructed to talk aloud about his or her concern or conflict as she or he walks around the stage. This gives information to the director about the nature of the conflict. The soliloquy is best used to warm up the protagonist to a conflict situation or to calm the protagonist down after a catharsis (J. L. Moreno, 1954; Starr, 1981).

A variation of this procedure is the *Aside Technique*, in which the director stops the action, as needed, and asks the protagonist: What are the thoughts and feelings you are presently experiencing. This procedure is used when it is too threatening for the protagonist to speak about thoughts and feelings directly to the auxiliary ego (Blatner, 1985; Heisey, 1982).

15. *Surplus Reality*. According to Yablonsky (1981), surplus reality involves magnifying a situation out of proportion to enable the subject and the group to get a closer look at the problem (p. 23). Imagery and play are the primary methods of exploring a protagonist's surplus reality (Blatner, 1973).

A variation of this technique is described by Goldman (1984), who suggests using a significant object (e.g., clock, picture, teddy bear) to induce surplus reality. The protagonist is asked to become the significant object and is interviewed in that role.

16. *Psychodramatic Body Building*. The protagonist chooses auxiliaries to assume the roles of various body parts to reproduce himself. The director interviews the protagonist (by having him or her reverse roles with the auxiliary) to determine how this part functions in relation to the rest of the body. The questions may be asked: "What do you usually do for this body? Are you noticed? Are you active? After completing one part, the protagonist proceeds to other parts (other auxiliaries) until the whole body is built. Once the body is complete, the protagonist is asked to step aside and watch the various parts interact. The director then asks the protagonist to identify unsatisfactory parts and rearrange them to achieve greater harmony. Situations to explore how the parts can function differently may also be enacted. Sharing is focused on bodily frustrations (Robbins and Robbins, 1970).

17. *Judgment Technique*. This technique is used to encourage forgiveness in a protagonist who is angry at a significant other. The protagonist is asked to select an auxiliary to play the role of God. God pulls the protagonist to the side and informs the protagonist that he or she is dead and is comfortably placed in heaven. God then assigns the protagonist the responsibility of deciding whether or not the significant other will be per-

mitted into heaven. The objective of this technique is to continue through other conflicting situations with the significant other until some resolution is achieved (Sacks, 1965).

18. **The Death Scene.** Used when a group member(s) is experiencing homicidal, suicidal, or other self/other destructive thoughts, this technique involves three phases—confrontation, judgment, and rebirth.

After an initial period of relaxation, the director dims the lights and confronts the protagonist by informing him or her that he or she is dead. The director asks the protagonist what it is like to be dead. If the protagonist displays anger or hostility, she or he is introduced to Mephistopheles, to bargain to receive the power to revenge his or her rage. If the “protagonist agrees to bargain with Mephisto, then she or he is allowed to act out his or her revenge” (Siroka and Schloss, 1968, p. 204).

If the protagonist is uncertain of his identity, or shows an inability to relate with others, the person is introduced to St. Peter, the embodiment of a kind old gentleman. St. Peter expresses surprise in finding the protagonist and interviews him or her concerning his ability to take on responsibilities, form close relationships, and act meaningfully. Following this defense, the protagonist is asked to call upon and reverse roles with someone who is willing to corroborate what was stated to St. Peter. Then the two are asked to reverse back, and St. Peter asks the protagonist “to state how he might have changed things had he still been alive” (Siroka and Schloss, 1968, p. 204).

During the judgment phase, a judge enters the scene and asks the protagonist to select group members to act as jurors. The protagonist serves as both a prosecuting and a defense attorney. The jury members are asked to share their feelings with the protagonist but not to judge the person. Neither the jury nor the judge passes a judgment; rather, the protagonist delivers the verdict.

The last phase, the rebirth, involves having the protagonist decide whether to be born again as the same person with the same problems or as a person with new insights who can take on responsibilities for his or her own life (Siroka and Schloss, 1968).

19. **The Good-Bye Technique.** This approach brings forth the protagonist’s struggle regarding feelings and thoughts about separation and termination from a significant other. The goal is to facilitate an individual’s direct expression, realization, and acceptance of the loss (Kaminski, 1981).

20. **Technique of Self-Realization.** Group members are instructed to think about their life plans, which are then enacted with the help of auxiliary egos (Z. Moreno, 1959).

21. **The Pressure Circle.** The protagonist is encircled by other group members who grasp arms and hold hands, not allowing the protagonist to

escape from the circle. The circle is symbolic of the protagonist's pressures. The protagonist is instructed by the director to escape by any means possible.

Another variation is the use of chairs to represent significant others. When chairs are used, the protagonist is asked to build a circle around himself and designate whom or what each chair represents. The protagonist must move the chairs where she or he wants them in order to escape the pressure circle (Weiner and Sacks, 1969). This technique is also referred to as the Breaking Out Technique (Blatner, 1973).

22. *Comfort Circle*. In this procedure, which is often used following a scene of grief, despair, or tragedy, group members surround the protagonist to offer love and compassion verbally and nonverbally (hugging, kissing, and physical contact). This is also used during the closure phase of therapy (Weiner and Sacks, 1969; Starr, 1979).

23. *Circle of Friends*. Past, present, and desired friends walk around the protagonist, listening to his or her dream. The friends interact until the dream is finished (Weiner and Sacks, 1969).

24. *The Wall or Fence*. Group members form a wall that represents the protagonist's inner barriers separating him or her from a significant other person. She or he is directed to break through the wall and make contact with the person on the other side (Weiner and Sacks, 1969). This procedure is also referred to as the Breaking-in Technique (Blatner, 1973).

A variation of this procedure, entitled the *Reacting Barrier Technique* and developed by Robbins (1968), is intended to increase communication. A symbolic wall of auxiliaries is placed between the protagonist and the significant other(s). Each auxiliary in the wall is assigned a specific task in the communication block, and every positive exchange gives the protagonist greater access to the significant other. Every negative exchange increases the distance from the significant other. Robbins emphasizes that the main purpose of this technique is to clarify interaction between significant others rather than to achieve catharsis.

25. *Shoulder and Shoulder Pushing*. The protagonist is asked to push around the stage a part of himself or herself that she or he likes or dislikes most. The director carefully watches the behavior, especially if there is extreme anger or sensitivity being demonstrated (Weiner and Sacks, 1969). This technique is often referred to as *Physicalizing* (Rabson, 1979).

26. *Behind the Back*. This method is analogous to arranging a "gossip group" that discusses the protagonist (or a group member) behind his or her back. The protagonist sits in a chair with his back toward the group and cannot take part in the group's discussion. Group members reveal their feelings, behavior, and attitudes toward this member (Corsini, 1953).

27. **Behind Your Back Audience Technique.** The protagonist asks the group members to leave; however, instead of leaving, they turn their backs to the protagonist. The protagonist pretends they have left and proceeds to tell each member of the group how she or he feels toward each (Z. Moreno, 1959).

28. **The Turn Your Back Technique.** An embarrassed, shy, or uncomfortable protagonist can state ideas and feelings to members of the group who intimidate him or her. The director instructs the protagonist to turn her or his back and pretend that she or he is in a familiar place but alone with the director (Z. Moreno, 1959).

29. **Implosive Psychodrama.** Implosive psychodrama (Gumina, Gonan, and Hagen, 1973) parallels implosive therapy (behavior therapy) in that both techniques share the belief that a strong emotional response is needed to bring about change. Both methods recreate the environment(s) in which the emotional response(s) took place and attempt to elicit an anxiety-provoking or emotion-arousing response. During the psychodrama session, the conditioned stimuli, events that produce an emotional arousal, are enacted (perhaps repeatedly) by the protagonist so that these can be aligned with a more secure setting, resulting in the extinction of anxiety responses. During this procedure, which is also referred to as the Psychodramatic Shock Technique, the protagonist replays a traumatic scene (many times) until it loses its negative power (Z. Moreno, 1966).

30. **Behavioristic Psychodrama.** Ferinden (1971) describes the use of this technique for modifying aggressive behavior in children. Children first act out negative behaviors, and then a discussion is held. Next, alternate positive behaviors are discussed and practiced through role playing. This is repeated weekly until the behaviors are modified. Children are requested to practice between psychodrama sessions.

31. **The Blackout Technique.** The protagonist is allowed to experience his psychodrama episode without observers and with a sense of solitude. The lights are turned off, the room becomes black, but the action continues (Z. Moreno, 1959).

32. **Focusing on the Differences.** The director asks the protagonist to choose two auxiliaries, one to represent herself and one to represent a significant, negative identity. The director places the two auxiliaries back to back and has the protagonist express critical differences between herself and the other. Each time a difference is mentioned, the auxiliaries move apart. When a similarity is accidentally stated, the auxiliaries come closer. When the protagonist can no longer recall differences or similarities, the director may assist in the evaluation of the differences by asking if the protagonist is, or is not, very similar to this other person (Miller, 1972).

33. *The Identification Technique.* Miller (1968) describes this technique as similar to the Focusing on the Differences concept. Rather than exploring differences, however, the protagonist investigates the similarities with significant others (Miller, 1972).

34. *The Substance Personification Technique.* With this procedure, designed for working with substance abusers, the protagonist chooses an auxiliary to personify the bottle, needle, powder, or pill. The auxiliary then attempts to entice the protagonist. The director asks the protagonist to do away with the personified substance and instructs the substance to fight back. The protagonist may recruit other auxiliaries to assist him in eliminating the personified substance (Blume, Robbins, and Branston, 1968).

35. *Future Projection.* This involves a conscious manipulation of time. When it is used in conjunction with the Double and Auxiliary Chair Technique, it helps the protagonist to make decisions. Diagnostically, the method aids the director and auxiliaries in assessing the protagonist's intentions regarding situations that cause him or her great anxiety. For example, the protagonist may be asked to practice a new behavior and to act it out with the support of auxiliary egos. Future projection allows the protagonist to experience the consequences of personal actions as these actions affect him or her and his or her significant others (Yablonsky, 1954; Rabson, 1979).

In a variation of this technique, called the Age of Regression, the director takes the protagonist back in time to significant events. This is specifically helpful to resistant protagonists who get stuck in roles, forget significant events, have difficulty verbalizing what or who is bothering them (Vander May, 1981).

Psychodivorce, a variation of Future Projection, helps patients deal with an impending divorce (Miller, 1964). The life ahead is experienced by using doubling and mirroring, with emphasis on the pre- and postdivorce emotions of loneliness, anger, guilt, and inadequacy

36. *Role Training.* The protagonist is asked to play a specific role, relevant to his or her conflict. This is followed by having other group members play the same role and demonstrate different possible solutions. During role training, discussions may take place after each enactment (Haskell, 1975; Hale, 1981).

37. *The Living Newspaper.* Members of the group are asked to act out an important event from history, something reported in the newspaper or on television. The purpose of this is to bring to life noteworthy situations that will enable people to comprehend how certain events affect their personal lives. An example is the trial of Adolf Eichmann. The trial had a profound effect on many people; but, more specifically, individuals who had a personal relationship to the atrocities of Nazism were deeply af-

ected by the trial. The various traumatic events that occur, such as the one mentioned, affect human beings and indeed have to be addressed in the psychodramatic modality that explores the agony felt privately (J. L. Moreno, 1947; Yablonsky, 1981).

38. Autodrama. This technique allows one person to play roles that are in conflict with one another. Role reversal and the interview in role reversal are basic techniques in executing a person's autodrama. This approach is useful in expanding the protagonist's perspective on a situation because it allows him or her to respond in a different but appropriate way. This technique is often referred to as a Monodrama (Weiner and Sacks, 1969; Blatner, 1973; Rabson, 1979).

39. Axiodrama. This method allows the protagonist to investigate specific ethical, moral, or value-type concerns that most individuals face at one time or another (Blatner, 1973).

Closure Techniques to Integrate Protagonist Back Into the Group

Closure ties the protagonist back into the group and gives him or her a regenerated sense of integration. Many group members are deeply affected by a psychodrama, and time is necessary to express and explore how the psychodrama relates to them. This last stage of the psychodramatic process requires that the director identify and tie together whatever loose ends are left for herself, group members, or the protagonist. The concept of integration during this phase is critical for every member of the group. Possible procedures are noted here.

1. De-roling. This provides the auxiliaries with an opportunity to state to the protagonist what they felt and what it was like to be in their designated roles. This process assists the auxiliaries to become free of their assumed roles (Haskell, 1975; Rabson, 1979).

2. Sharing. In sharing, the audience gives feedback to the protagonist by discussing personal reactions to the psychodrama episode. Group members share relevant personal experiences and do not analyze, interpret, or ask questions of the protagonist (Goldman, 1984).

Barber (1977) has suggested several variations of sharing to facilitate meeting specific group needs. For example, he notes that a nonverbal sharing of looking, touching, and making sounds may be better after a wordy drama (p. 123). Members may not reveal their concerns or feelings during sharing. Blatner (1973) suggests using the Unfinished Business Technique to get group members to express their resentments toward and appreciations of each other. Blatner and Moreno (1952) stress that it is not always necessary to work on concerns that emerge during the sharing session, but it is important that uncommunicated feelings be expressed.

3. Summarization. In task-oriented groups, a summary of events, implications, and future plans (e.g., agenda for the next meeting, choice of protagonist) is useful in keeping the group members focused on the problems to be resolved (Blatner, 1973).

4. Dealing With Separation. To facilitate the parting of group members after a session, Blatner (1973) suggests "ritualizing the separation experience" by having the group form a circle to acknowledge thoughts and ideas about being away from one another until the next meeting. This technique may help the group members learn to handle the painful separation process, either terminal or temporary, with relationships where grief and admiration were an integral part of the bonding process.

5. The Final Empty Chair. After group members have shared with the protagonist, the Final Empty Chair technique allows participants the opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts to empty chair(s) that are filled with the absent roles that have been portrayed by the protagonist. Group members have the opportunity to "share more completely, and gain the same value from action that the protagonist received" (Speros, 1972).

A Concluding Comment

The forementioned psychodramatic techniques were never intended to be used as prescribed formulas to cure a diagnosed ailment. Moreno stated succinctly that a goal of psychodrama was "not to replace meaning by skillful composition and the marvels of technique" (Moreno, 1964, p. 41). The techniques summarized here can generate ideas for both the novice and the experienced practitioner to use in finding ways to assist groups in achieving their objectives.

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